烙印の紋章 VI

いにしえの宮に竜はめざめる

杉原智則

イラスト●3

電撃文庫

寝床で横になっていてもなかなか寝つけずにいた。
ぬくぬくとした床のなかであれこれ案じているよりも、
せめて外に出て、父と同じ空気を吸いながら、
父の武運を竜神に祈りたかった。
タウーリア一、どころか西方一の美姫として名高いエスメナである。
柔らかな頬を風が撫でるに任せ、目を閉じて祈る姿は、
タウラン地域に伝わるレリーフによく描かれている、
竜神に身を捧げた古代の巫女姫メウルを思わせるものがある。

「オルバといったな。どうだ、小隊を預からんか」
またもラスピウスが笑いを噛み殺したのは、
さすがのオルバも仮面の向こうで目を白黒させたからだ。
「おれ……いや、わたしが、でありますか」
「そうだ。傭兵を五十人。少なければもっとまわす。
銃も新式を十丁は準備できよう。馬も可能な限りまわす」

「な、なぜわたしが」
「褒美のひとつと考えてもらっても構わんが、それだけではない。
傭兵たちを率いるには、大儀や名誉を振りかざすだけでは駄目だ。
給金を増やすだけで全員が命知らずの勇士になれるかというとそれもちがう。
なにより、求心力のある人物が必要だ」

馬上のオルバ、先頭にいた騎馬武者と槍を交わした。
穂先が火花を放ち、それが消えきらぬうちに両騎影がすれちがう。
オルバの腕にずしりとした重みが残った。槍の達人だ。鎧兜の色と形状からして、
「ニルギフ」
叫びつつ、馬首を翻す。
一方、ニルギフのほうも相手の姿に驚きを覚えていた。
「仮面の剣士。貴様か」
兄のモロドフがいっていた相手に相違ない。
仮面の剣士は兄のいく手ことごとくにあらわれ、邪魔をしていたという。

タウラン地域

デザイン●カマベヨシヒコ

Prologue

The wind blew fiercely as though intent on tormenting him.

As it was a westerly wind, it carried a large amount of sand with it. Reizus stood there, stock still beneath his deep hood, his long sleeve pressed against his nose and mouth.

Before him, an abandoned citadel lay as silent as death. The ruined city appeared a hazy brown through the sand-laden wind and in truth, there was not a single trace of life within. More than two hundred years ago, the outer walls that now lay buried in the sand had been destroyed at the hands of plunderers, and of the many buildings that had been set ablaze, nothing but innumerable broken pillars remained.

The city had once been called Zer Illias.

Reizus lightly held down the hood that he wore low over his eyes and moved forward, watching his surroundings as cautiously as a snake.

It's strange, he thought as he progressed along the empty way.

Zer Tauran was a country that had risen like an illusion in this western region of the continent more than two hundred years ago, and that, like an illusion, had then disappeared. The Zerdians still yearned after that era in part because they were proud of once having had a dignity equal to that of any other country of the continent. The leaders of the city-states scattered throughout the west burned with the ambition of personally reviving Zer Tauran even as they continued to engage in bloody feuds against each other.

Yet even so…

Zer Tauran's capital, Zer Illias, was in this state. There was no one to pour their energy into restoring it, nor anyone to even visit it. The large structure was simply left to be eroded by the sands and to decay and be lost with the passing of the years. What Reizus felt was "strange" was the thought that the Zerdians seemed to want to erase the abominable memory from their minds with a prayer-like fervour. Yet the still unforgettable glory of Zer Tauran's name was handed down from generation to generation.

The endless wind blew incessantly. Reizus' worn-out boots crunched through the sand. Before long, the path came to a wide staircase. The stairs wound up the hill into which they had been carved more than two centuries earlier, and here too were the obvious traces of a brutal invasion.

On either side of Reizus stood a slanted gatepost, broken from halfway up. Beyond them, broken stones of all sizes were piled into heaps and obstructed further passage. Again, there was no sign of living creatures. Not a trace could be found of the lizards and snakes that could be expected to live there, and neither were there any birds in the sky. It was as though every sound but that of the wind had been locked away into stillness, afraid of the ruins of this civilisation whose city lay wrecked and destroyed.

The Zerdians are also afraid. Reizus' steps came to a halt and he gazed at the ruins of what had once been a temple that towered over crowds of pilgrims from the highest point in the city.

Rather than King Yasch Bazgan, the one who had held power here and who had been master of the temple was Garda, a priest to the Dragon Gods. Garda had been a sorcerer skilled at using ether. There was an anecdote about how a bishop who had rebuked him for his imperious behaviour had been publicly turned into a moth. And another one about how one summer when there had been very little rain, a farmer had come to plead before him for a reduction by half of the tithe he had to pay in crops that year.

"Oh, I see. So you want rain? Then if you want it, I will give it you," Garda had declared, throwing out his chest. It was said that from the next day onwards for a full week, heavy rains had fallen without cease. Black clouds had formed only over the supplicant's farm and most of his harvest had been washed away.

Garda attracted fear and dread throughout the West. According to the analysis of some historians, it was because of Garda's existence that Yasch, a foreigner to the Zerdians, was able to establish a country in that region.

After Yasch's death, the country fell to ruin and the fires of rebellion flared up in many quarters. The fighting was not limited to the Zerdians alone. Seizing the opportunity, savage desert tribes had attacked from the west and invaded Zer Illias. In those days, Garda had attained position as the head of sorcery and he protected the capital Zer Illias, which was severely lacking in military might, with terrifying esoteric magic.

"But in less than a year," Reizus' cracked lips parted in a mutter, "or no, perhaps I should say that the magical power and the several hundred believers managed to hold out for almost a year?"

Zer Illias was set alight by the invaders. It was known far and wide that the tribesmen with skin the colour of the desert sands had mercilessly and brutally slaughtered the people and destroyed their dwellings. When in the end their rough voices could be heard even as far as the temple, Garda merely uttered those words that were still transmitted in the history of the western region:

"I will never hand over the Dragon God's Claws. Not to any king or queen, not to any

archbishop no matter what divine protection he may be blessed with. No, not even if my body were to be destroyed and my ashes scattered throughout the steppes."

The Dragon God's Claws had served as the sovereign's seal under the Magic Dynasty of long ago and Yasch Bazgan had received them from the land's elders when he founded his country. There had been two of them and the descendants of the Bazgan House had inherited one which was now in the city-state of Taúlia. Garda however had left the other as an offering to the temple and to this day it had never been found.

Even though the savage tribesmen had seized sculptures, money and other treasures from the temple, of the sovereign's seal alone they had discovered no trace. Moreover, while the hundred or more of the believers who had sequestered themselves in the temple had all slit their own throats, it was said that the remains of Garda himself were nowhere to be seen.

And thus even to this day, the Zerdians held his name in some awe. Or perhaps it should be called a fear deeply rooted within the passing generations. If someone said something that was in the least bit critical of the Zer Tauran era or of the Dragon Gods, then even if they were in the middle of the rowdiest of banquets, someone would hiss "Shhh" and press a hand to their mouth to stop them from talking. After which, the whole group would recite a prayer to the Dragon Gods to protect themselves against Garda's vengeful spirit.

"Humph," Reizus uttered in a voice grown hoarse and gazed once more at the temple's ruins. For two hundred years, no hands had touched them but they had not originally been built during the Zer Tauran era. Back in those days, Yasch Bazgan had dug what appeared to be old ruins out from the sand dunes and had had them restored. Because of that, the pillars and stones were thoroughly worn down and no longer retained the aspect of a temple. The voices of the dead wailing their resentment could be heard carried on the endless wind.

If one who does not carry the sovereign's seal sets foot in the temple of Zer Illias, they will be killed by Garda's vengeful spirit was it? Reizus thought back to the rumours he had heard in Zerdian villages during his travels.

Garda's ghost was said to still remain within the temple at Zer Illias, guarding one of the sovereign's seals. Waiting for more than two hundred years for someone bearing the other seal to appear. It was also said that when the sovereign's seal was once more complete, Garda's spirit would be released from Zer Illias and in exchange, the city now ruled by the stillness of death and decay would be restored and the one who carried the seal would be granted tremendous magical power.

Reizus was of course not carrying the sovereign's seal. Furthermore, although sorcery was his livelihood, he had not previously been particularly interested in Garda's legend.

So why am I here? He wondered anew. The question had often come to him on his journey.

He had been expelled from his country. If ever set foot in the Grand Duchy of Ende again, the only destiny that awaited him was to have the country's soldiers turn their spears against him and the sorcerers of the Bureau of Sorcery, to which he himself had once belonged, target his life.

Reizus however was not pessimistic about his own fate. He was proud of the fact that being as knowledgeable about ether as he was, he could expect to make a living no matter where he was. He had however no interest in worldly fame or status. What he wanted was an environment in which he could devote himself heart and soul to the study of sorcery. As long as it wasn't as bound by strict religious precepts as Ende was, anywhere would do.

Should I turn my steps towards the east? When the time came to cross the border, Reizus had certainly been thinking along those lines.

To the east, beyond the country of Ryalide and the kingdom of Allion, along the great river Tīda was a wilderness stretching ever further northeast in which were said to be villages belonging to a clan that had, like Ende and Arion, handed down magic technology from ancient times. He had intended to proceed there and to devote what time he had left to his studies.

But… He himself didn't know what whim had seized him. For some reason, the day after leaving Ende and after having stopped for a night at a post station, he had retraced his steps and, without re-crossing the border, had chosen to make his way on foot through the perilous Nouzen Mountains and to travel to the west of Ende.

His reason for doing so could accurately be called a vague premonition. If he were to express it as a sorcerer, it was something like being guided by ether. When he had awakened from sleep in his lodgings, he had found that he wanted to check with his own eyes the vestiges left by Garda, whom he had heard of from rumours and legends. And when he had crossed through Mephius and stepped into the Tauran lands, that desire had swelled to such an extent that he could barely control himself.

How much time had passed since he had left Ende? Now the ruins of Zer Illias that he had unceasingly yearned for were before his eyes. But he felt no sense of elation. Instead, his heart seemed to have grown hollow and as the wind blew through, it echoed within that empty space.

Ruins and ancient history.

Reizus had already passed sixty. No matter how wide the dominions acquired, nor how great the glory attained, with the passing of time, the names of cities, civilisations and legends would all be buried in the sand.

The study of sorcery. My blood flows for that alone. I have no other pleasures. For that, I

would sacrifice my family, my life, my heart and if necessary even the soul that marks me as human. I have no regrets. None, and yet…

As he stood before the pile of ruins he was seized by doubts about the results he had achieved in the studies he had pursued at the cost of sacrificing himself. Reizus had very little time left. The research themes for him to puzzle over increased day by day, and just thinking about how little he would be able to accomplish before his life ran out was almost enough to drive him to despair.

I too will decay and die. My body will rot, eventually my bones will turn to sand and be scattered by the wind and my heart… Where will my heart go? The sixty years of knowledge and wisdom that I have accumulated, the many sorcery techniques that I have clarified or adapted, who will inherit them? Will my life become someone else's stepping stone while my body and heart fade into oblivion? Just as I stepped over so many that I knew nothing about.

Until then, Reizus had not realised his own age, nor the weight of the years piled upon his body. Before he noticed it, he had fallen to both his knees in the sand. He felt so unbearably sad that his actions were like those of a young man. Although knowing it would do no good, driven by the desire to berate himself, he was about to slam his head on the floor of the ruins.

The wind that licked his cheeks changed.

When he realised it, Reizus stood up with an agility that didn't match his age and jumped backwards in a single breath. Thanks to the artefact he had fitted into his boots, he was able to move as though his body were as light as a feather.

As Reizus jumped and landed seven, eight metres away, he turned his eyes upwards. Within the opening of the slanted gatepost was a shadow which had not been there a moment ago. It's four paws firmly planted on unsteady footholds, there stood a beast with golden fur. Even if he called upon the wisdom gathered by Ende's Bureau of Sorcery of which he had once been a member, Reizus did not have the slightest idea what this beast was. The mane around its neck brought to mind a lion, but the dull red glint of its eyes and the tightly-packed, blueish-green scales that only covered its face made him wonder if it wasn't a type of dragon that was as yet undiscovered anywhere in the world. In any case –

Reizus pulled a dagger from at his breast. Indeed, in any case, wherever this unknown beast had appeared from, its immediate aim was clear. Its head was lowered and in the pair of red eyes that peered his way, there was not a speck of either intelligence or mercy. Peeking out from its upraised lips were a great many fangs every bit as sharp as the blade in Reizus' hand. They glaringly revealed that its instinct would be to crunch through his body.

“Certainly, I was looking back on my life and feeling hopeless,” Reizus twisted a single cheek into a crooked smile, “but any way you put it, ending my life inside your damn stomach

is out of the question."

The sand-laden wind still blew. It seemed to have gotten a bit stronger.

The beast moved. It jumped from the gatepost without a sound. Reizus' body lightly drew a semi-circle. He swung his dagger to scythe at the beast's legs. But the beast was faster than expected. His aim in no way erred, but still the beast's claws tore into Reizus' chest.

While staggering, Reizus quickly looked back. The beast had landed just in front of the bottom of the stairs and was about to turn its head towards him. It had lost the right paw that Reizus' dagger had severed. But not a single drop of blood was it shedding and neither did it appear to be in pain. Furthermore, its posture hadn't faltered in the slightest.

Rather than being "severed", it felt as though its right paw simply happened to be "missing".

Reizus directed his gaze downwards. There were three incisions in his chest. A large amount of blood was seeping out, but what Reizus focussed his attention on wasn't his own wound. It was on the tip of the dagger that he grasped in his right hand. He couldn't see the colour of blood there.

Both ends of his lips curled upwards. Even though it was a battle injury that would have caused a brawny young warrior to turn pale, he smiled. With a loud clanging sound, the dagger fell to the stairs that innumerable pilgrims had once ascended. Having thrown away his only weapon, Reizus held out his left hand to the beast. On the wrist of that arm, he wore a jewel-encrusted bracelet. He raised his right palm above the portion with the jewels.

The beast lowered its posture again. It kicked the stone floor with its three legs. In a single bound, it swooped in, aiming for Reizus' throat.

Reizus' right hand traced a complicated movement above the jewels. His gesture was as though he were drawing an invisible pattern and at that moment, his left sleeve suddenly bulged. The beast's fangs were almost at Reizus' jugular and its claws at his chest.

"Nuh!" Reizus let out a spirited cry and a swirling vortex was released from his bulging sleeve.

Wind.

Nor was it wind any less intense than the natural kind – on the contrary, it was a far stronger wind than that which gushed out from Reizus' left arm. When the wind dashed over the beast's snout, its figure suddenly collapsed.

The claws and fangs that had been about to eradicate Reizus' life, the ferocious countenance and the golden body – still suspended in mid-air, the beast crumbled and scattered. In the

blink of an eye, it disintegrated into minute particles that were carried away by the wind, forming into a glittering, streaming tail that flew off into the sky. The beast had not been a thing of this world. It was an aggregation of sand.

“Splendid.” Reizus became aware that there were the figures of humans in his surroundings. Five people encircled him. As though he had had a presentiment of it, his face showed no surprise. Each of them had hoods entirely pulled over their heads and wore robes adorned with complicated embroidery.

“Was it you bastards who used sorcery to conjure up that beast?” Reizus asked. The hand he rubbed his chest with showed no trace of clotted blood. When he had perceived that what he had been enacting a desperate struggle with was an illusionary beast that could not exist, Reizus’ wound had vanished. Of course, had he have been pierced by those claws and fangs without realising that they were phantoms, he would have died. Strong auto-suggestion was a life-threatening thing. Since he himself specialised in the arts of illusion, he was well aware of their effectiveness and of their risks.

“Are you the grave keepers of Zer Illias? Then you have no reason to mind me. I won’t desecrate Garda’s remains. I’ll be leaving after this.”

“You will be leaving? Then why did you come here?” From among the figures that he assumed to be sorcerer, one man spoke. He must have been about the same age as Reizus.

Reizus faltered for a moment. The question of why he had come here was one he had been asking himself just a while ago.

“It was just…”

“You were called,” asserted the sorcerer, forestalling Reizus who was about to say that it had been a whim.

“Called?”

“Indeed.”

Starting with the man who gave a single nod, they performed an unexpected action towards Reizus. Suddenly, wind swirled up and rushed towards him – was not what happened. Instead, all of them knelt where they were.

“We have been waiting.”

As one, they lowered their head. This too left Reizus dumbfounded.

“You were waiting? Are you saying that you called me from Ende?”

“This way,” said a woman’s voice. As she wore a hood, her face could not be seen but her manner when she took Reizus’ hand made it easy to imagine her supple body even through her baggy robes. At that moment, his consciousness was severed for an instant.

When he became aware, their surroundings were wrapped in darkness. The constant wind of sand had suddenly stopped. Blinking in surprise, Reizus realised that without his noticing it, he was now inside of a stone chamber. A narrow passageway stretched out before him and opened into a room in which there was something like an altar.

The sorcerers surrounded the altar. Each of them held a cup in their hands in which flames flickered, and raised them up.

“This way,” the old sorcerer beckoned Reizus. From start to finish, Reizus understood neither the reason nor the meaning. But somehow, feeling that he couldn’t go against this, he stepped forward. He held no fear.

The strong pounding in his chest was bred from hope in an uncertain future.

I was… called.

The man’s words echoed in his head. They were probably within the ruins of the sacred temple. Rather than anxiety about what was going to happen to him, the curiosity characteristic of a researcher was uppermost within him.

When he climbed the short flight of steps to the altar, an old stone coffin was lying there. The pounding in his chest was now beating so hard that it seemed it would destroy that solitary man from the inside. Two of the hooded sorcerers knelt on either side of the sarcophagus and lifted the lid. Although they didn’t seem to have put any great strength into it, a narrow gap appeared between the lid and the coffin, allowing Reizus to peer inside.

“Ooh,” unconsciously, a groan escaped from Reizus’ lips. The flames held aloft by the sorcerers illuminated the figure of the person stretched out inside the coffin. The flesh however had completely dried and the figure was like a wooden doll. It was Mīla. Her appearance was the same as when she had died, her hands were clasped at her waist and she protectively held a small box.

“……”

The sunken eye sockets could no longer express emotions as they had when she was alive, but the mouth was open wide as though she had let out scream just before her life ran out. Or perhaps as though she was cursing Reizus, who had desecrated her grave. At that moment, for the first time, Reizus’ blood ran cold in fear.

“Oh, as expected. You received the seal of approval.”

As the man muttered, Reizus felt as though his soul had been raked by claws. At that moment, Mīla's hands moved. He wondered whether this was some trick played by the sorcerers, but as though he was enthralled by her , Reizus couldn't stir. Her slender arms were jerkily raised in the air. As he watched, the hands that just a moment earlier had been clasping the small box now held it up before him.

This is – When the cover of the box lifted up of its own accord, a dark red light struck Reizus' eyes. A jewel. It was of a size that needed to be held in both hands. Something like a bubble was floating inside it and within it was buried something like a fragment.

Reizus brought his face closer to see it better.

With a snapping sound, a crack appeared in the jewel. As he watched, more cracks appeared and the jewel broke from within. Immediately after, the white fragment moved liked a snake.

After, there was no chance to utter a sound. As he wondered whether the fragment had leapt into the air, a sharp pain ran through Reizus' forehead.

Although it was a pain strong enough to make him want to crouch down on the spot, his body had lost all freedom of movement. He clearly understood that the white fragment was eating away at his brow and, accompanied by an immense heat, was crawling into his head. He wanted to scream. Writhing in agony, he wanted to shake it off with his hand. However, his body wouldn't act as he wished and unable even to cry out, he could only endure as it was slowly eaten away.

On the other side of his barely closed eyelids, a vast darkness expanded. Countless stars were scattered across the night sky above. At the same time, the point that Reizus looked down on was tightly packed with people. All of them wore black garments and as they prostrated themselves, it was as though heaven and earth were painted the same colour.

There had been no such scene in Reizus' life. And yet, the vision felt so real and so vivid that he shivered.

"Hear me, you all," Reizus – or possibly one with the same appearance as Reizus – cried out from on high to the devotees who thronged beneath him like a black sea. "All gods who live on earth are destined to die. Just as the dragons that once controlled heaven and earth did. However, the dragons did not perish. While the dragons' bodies have been claimed by death, their souls remain in this world; they have whispered to me, they have commanded me, they would have me make the preparations for their second coming to this world. Before the gods die out and humanity meets its destruction, you should dedicate all you possess to me. The wealthy merchants their gold, the strong swordsmen their might, the sages their wisdom, those with nothing their lives!"

As soon as Reizus raised his hands, the sky shook.

Thereupon, one of the stars shook free from the sky and fell diagonally through the darkness before his eyes. After which, stars fell in quick succession, forming innumerable rays of light. The light formed into a single lump and dispelled everything that Reizus had been watching - the people, the sky, the darkness, but more than that, the seething radiance seemed to pierce through his body then burst forth.

Spurred on by the intense radiance, Reizus opened both his eyes.

It was the same as before: a narrow, dimly-lit stone chamber with none beside him but the five sorcerers. But a change had occurred. Within Reizus himself.

Pain, fear, curiosity – all that had dominated him until just moments ago had vanished. In their place was a vigorous strength such as he had never felt before, a kind of spiritual awakening, and also, a hatred stronger than anything.

“Please tell us,” from among the kneeling sorcerers, the woman asked. Her voice quivered slightly. It wasn’t only the woman. The shoulders of all five sorcerers shook and their voices cried out. “Please tell us. Your Glorious Name.”

“My name. My name is. I am… …”

Reizus tried to answer. From the time he had been born sixty years ago, he had always called himself by that name.

However, his voice utterly refused to pass through his lips. His expression was bewildered, but after the slightest of intervals, he nodded as though having understood something. His eyes held an increasingly fiery radiance.

“Yes, I am –”

Chapter 1: Tempest

Part 1

Esmena, the daughter of Taúlia's governor-general Ax Bazgan, was under a canopy that was set up the on the rooftop of the hall.

Dawn was close at hand.

"Princess, won't you be returning soon?"

The young lady's maid accompanying her asked while looking as though she was stifling her yawns. It was no wonder. Upon suddenly awakening up at midnight, her mistress had immediately left her room. Thinking that it might be one of her usual fits, the ladies' maids had hurriedly chased after her without even changing their clothes. "I can't sleep. I will go for a breath of fresh air," Esmena had said, seeming rather puzzled at their flustered state. In the end, the youngest of her ladies' maids had accompanied her.

The inner quarters and the palace were connected by a long corridor that was guarded night and day. As had been the custom since long ago, the paths to the inner palace other than the corridor were blocked by the moat, in exchange for which, one could proceed through the corridor into the palace and directly to the throne room. As a relic from when the inner quarters had still been barred to men, when women came to the castle, they tried as much as possible to remain out of sight.

On the rooftop, as well Esmena and the lady's maid, a single guard on night watch stood in each of the parapets on either side.

Wispy clouds drifted across the sky. The stars that were disappearing behind the hazy light of dawn twinkled as though gasping for breath.

Esmena's eyes were fixed on the western direction. At this time, her father would be hurrying on horseback further and further to the west of Taúlia. It was around dusk yesterday that the interior of the castle had suddenly flurried into activity. Soldiers in full armour as well as horses and dragons lined up in rows outside the castle. That war was about to break out – and furthermore one in which would decide the fate of their House – was apparent to all. It had

come as a complete surprise to Esmena.

According to what her father had said, the fleetest units would first rush west for a day and night without pause. Straddling his horse, Ax had embraced his wife Jaina and his daughter Esmena to his left and right, and had simply said,

“I'll be back soon.”

It seemed that the preparations for organising the troops had been proceeding in secret until just then. Even her mother Jaina had probably not heard of them.

“We will be awaiting your return, my lord,” Jaina bowed, her bearing exactly the same as it always was whenever she saw Ax off to the battle front. “I will look forward to performing a victory dance for you, my lord.”

“Yeah,” Ax grinned as put on his helmet. He too wore the same expression as usual. He turned to smile at Esmena also, then pulled on his reins and departed at the head of the troops.

Later, when it was already past midnight, the infantry corps and artillerymen had also lined up and left the castle. The units had been separated so as to make it difficult for the enemy to suspect their movements until such a time as the advance party was already upon them.

The enemy.

That ominous word flashed through Esmena's mind. She had learned after her father's departure that Cherik had set up camp near the border to the west of Taúlia. It was said that Cherik's aim was to contain them. Because of that, Taúlia had been unable to help the northern Helio, which had apparently been occupied by Garda's forces.

“With the cavalry's speed, they will easily reach Cherik's camp before daybreak,” was what the soldiers who had stayed behind at the castle had said when she asked them about it.

“Will it be war?”

“According to Strategist Ravan, it probably won't go as far as war. For the time being, Cherik should be putting it's all into defence. Meanwhile, the lord's vanguard unit will prevent things from turning into the siege war that Cherik expects.”

Esmena softly bit her lower lip. She knew the name of Garda. The terrifying sorcerer who often appeared in her nightmares and tormented her called himself none other than Garda. However, her encounter with the crown prince of Mephius, Gil and then the notification of his death had driven it from her memory.

Currently, the majority of the troops had left and the number of soldiers remaining within

Taúlia did not total three hundred. Esmena had not had the slightest idea that the situation had grown so urgent.

A deep sigh escaped from her rose-coloured lips.

She didn't know when it had started, but right then, Esmena felt like an awfully small, utterly ignorant, worthless human being. The thought of how truly empty she was filled her with fear and tore her sensitive heart to shreds.

It was rare for Esmena Bazgan to take a step outside of this city-state of Taúlia. It could well be said that for the most part, she did not even understand Taúlia itself. As a result, and even if she thought about it, she couldn't grasp the first clue as to what was the full extent of the situation with Cherik, what Taúlia's chances of victory were, or what she, as the daughter of the Bazgan House, should do in this castle now that its lord was absent and that most of its military might had left.

Nobody tells me anything. They were laughing at me behind my back. It was as good as saying that even if that princess believes that she is living a contented life, she is just a doll whose head and heart are empty.

Even when she lay between her sheets, she truly couldn't sleep. Instead of worrying about this and that while in her snug and comfortable bed, she had wanted to go outside where she would at least be able to breathe the same air as her father while praying to the Dragon Gods for his good fortune in war.

Esmena was famed as the greatest beauty in Taúlia, and indeed, of the west. She had her eyes closed and her appearance as she let the wind caress her soft cheeks was reminiscent of the sculpted relief widely depicted throughout Tauran of the ancient priestess-princess Meuru offering herself to the Dragon Gods. Unware of her thoughts, the lady's maid, who was younger than her, was admiring her mistress' beautiful face when,

"What are you doing? At this hour."

Hearing a voice raised half in reprimand, Esmena and the lady's maid turned around, startled. There was Raswan Bazgan, whom the soldiers on duty were greeting with a salute. He was the first-born son of Toún Bazgan, who was Governor-General Ax's younger brother and the man responsible for the Defence Corps. In other words, Raswan was Esmena's cousin.

"You too, Lord Raswan. Why are you…?"

"I'm helping Father," perhaps because it was somewhat self-mocking, Raswan's smile turned cruel. "Now that His Lordship is no longer present, we must maintain a strict guard at all times. You too are important, Princess. You should go back to your room now."

“Thank you. Then I shall do so.”

Although her wording and manner were courteous, Esmena had always found it hard to deal with her cousin, who never listened to what anyone had to say. Just as she was about to turn back,

“Princess,” Raswan rudely approached her at a distance so close she wanted to scream out loud.

“Wh-What is it?”

As Esmena asked that, opening her eyes even wider than usual, Raswan showed unusual hesitation under the sharply penetrating light in those eyes.

“No… The situation is as you know. Take care of yourself.”

“Thank you.”

Esmena smiled, however Raswan did not put more distance between them as one would at the end of a conversation. At the same time, neither did he say anything. Esmena felt it was strange as they had never had a close relationship, and so she was the one to open the distance between them then, with bow, she left the roof. The lady’s maid hurried after her.

“Lord Raswan looked as though he wished to talk a little longer.”

“It’s not that I felt against it,” Esmena put a hand to her cheek, “however, there is no denying that Raswan is at heart a warrior and if we remain too long in the same place, the atmosphere is likely to become unbearably mannish.”

“Hmm. But, Princess, is your father not also a true-born Taúlian warrior? And even though General Bouwen, with whom the princess has a good relationship, is usually a very gentle person, at heart he is clearly a rough warrior.” “Is that so? And yet, even now I can’t imagine Bouwen fighting with a sword in hand.”

“But if anything, I think that Lord Raswan has the more refined manner and that he does not project such a mannish atmosphere.”

And his appearance is also good, she added in a low voice. Esmena laughed softly at her honest way of speaking. Esmena did not have anything like friends close to her in age, but since binding herself in a vow of sisterhood with Princess Ineli in Apta and also, although it was unsure whether Esmena herself realised this, since encountering the insolent masked mercenary after Prince Gil’s death, her connection to those near had grown deeper than before.

Raswan, who had been left behind on the roof, clicked his tongue. The sun was gradually rising and it was the time when the figures of people could start to be seen in the fields around the outer walls.

Originally, Raswan had also been supposed to rush to Cherik at the head of the dragoon unit. Ax had selected five hundred dragon riders to entrust him with. However, Raswan himself had made a request.

“This time, I would help Father. Since it is my hope that sooner or later, I too will shoulder the important duty of defending the country.”

Raswan’s appearance resembled that of a Garberan knight and he displayed a nobleman’s figure, but he was known to fight like a demon on the battlefield. Therefore, although it seemed slightly surprising to Ax, this request had another meaning. By saying that he would succeed Toún Bazgan, he was also in effect declaring that he would not take part in the struggle for succession to become Taúlia’s governor-general.

Recognising that admirable intention, Ax left Raswan behind as commander of Taúlia’s garrison. Naturally, he never imagined that a viper was building its nest inside the heart of this nephew who was so splendidly growing to adulthood.

A lone shadow quietly stole up to Raswan, who was looking irritability in the direction Esmena had left in.

“Lord Raswan.”

With a start, he turned to look and saw a short, aged man. A very ordinary man dressed in the garb of a civil servant and with nothing about him that attracted attention. Nonetheless, Raswan appeared nervous and, under the pretence of checking that the guards standing in the parapets on either side of them were sufficiently far away, he averted his eyes.

“Now that things are coming to a head, it’s best that you don’t do anything out of the usual. The majority of the soldiers left in the castle are not our allies. Although no one here has good intuition.”

“I know,” Raswan’s expression turned bitterer. “The girl who is the direct descendant of the governor-general’s lineage is needed in order to govern Taúlia peacefully. Since she will be involved, regrettably I feel that we cannot cut her life down and so I came to check on the situation for a bit.” He felt as though the old man’s eyes could see inside his heart. Having worked up his courage, he had spoken in a deliberately severe tone of voice.

“There is very little time before we rise to action. You must issue a notice to the soldiers.”

In preparation for this day, Raswan had come to an understanding with the commanding

officers and high-placed retainers who were dissatisfied with the alliance between Ax and Mephius. Among the soldiers employed by Toún Bazgan, there were also those who had indicated their support. With regards to the essential piece that was his father however, he acted in secret. Raswan knew his father's timid nature. Risking having the plan come to light because of a failed attempt at persuasion was a folly he would not commit. He had already settled his resolve. And even if it was his own father –

If he stands in my way, I will cut him down.

Nevertheless, Raswan had not revealed the whole plan to those who had joined him. In other words, he had to formally notify the soldiers that, utilising the invasion by Garda's army, he intended to stage the uprising on this very day.

"I will leave the timing to you."

"Yes," the old man nodded his narrow chin. Information about the entire remote western region seemed to be accessible to him without his stirring from Taúlia. Ordinarily, such a thing would be completely impossible to believe, but Raswan had had many a chance to verify it. It was because he believed in his power in the first place that Raswan had decided to stage an armed uprising within Taúlia. There was no room for doubt now.

"Those who do not feel easy with peace with Mephius are pivotal. Naturally, once we obtain Taúlia, next will be war with Mephius. We mustn't make any mistakes in our preparations in that regards either."

"Leave it to me."

"You," Raswan's sharp eyes suddenly kindled with curiosity, "you can 'see' the west, but what about Mephius? Can you see what is actually going on there?"

"To a certain extent. The vassals grow increasingly dissatisfied at the current emperor's conspicuous and opinionated self-righteousness. But at the same time, no one knows what kind of treatment to expect if they oppose the emperor, and so the mood is somewhat heavy. In addition, now that the crown prince has died, it seems that there is internal dissent about what position to adopt with regards to his fiancée, the Garberan princess."

"Which means that there will be plenty of opportunities to take advantage of."

"Indeed," both the old man's expression and tone of voice remained the same as ever.

Raswan took a deep breath and looked up at the sky, then dropped his gaze to the slumbering streets of Taúlia below. He was young and vigorous, and also proud of being descended from the Bazgan House. But because of the peace that had come from the war with Mephius, that pride –

Has been snatched away.

He was vexed. Raswan's youth did not allow him to forgive. Both his violent blood that was always in search of an outlet and the advice of the old man currently by his side spurred him into action.

Raswan trembled.

Not from fear. When he read of Zer Tauran in history books, when he called to mind how Taúlia must pursue that ideal in the future, when he saw the city of Taúlia before his eyes as he did now – a certain thought would always come to Raswan's mind.

Always, ever since childhood. That thought having finally taken form, he felt that it was actually within reach, and Raswan trembled.

Part 2

At roughly the same time as Raswan was burning with ambition in Taúlia, Moldorf, the Red Dragon of Kadyne, was spurring his horse on with furious energy. The troops following him numbered approximately three thousand. They were Garda's forces that had departed from Helio. As they charged on raising thick clouds of dust, they were of course unaware that even then, fires were rising up within Helio. They urged their horses and dragons onwards, solely intent on swooping down on Taúlia's main force as it headed towards Cherik.

There could be no way for the enemy to be aware their movements. Even for Moldorf, it was incomprehensible how the sorcerer from Garda's army so thoroughly understood Taúlia's movements. Given their numbers, they would reap Ax's head in instant. And then,

If we take Ax's head,

Those who were being held hostage in the various cities would all be released, was what the sorcerer had said. It was only a verbal promise. It was uncertain how far it could be trusted, but from the very start, Moldorf and the others had obeyed because they were being threatened with having their family and friends killed. They could only move the army as they were told to do.

Coming from the north of Cherik, their march had brought them to a position that directly overlooked Lake Soma to their right. For a moment, a column of lit fires brilliantly illuminated the lake that lay beneath the shadows of the night. This was to inform Cherik that assistance was on its way. Everything would go to waste if that city became frightened of Taúlia's large army and hurried to surrender. The signal was to tell them that their forces and Cherik's would contrive a pincer attack.

However, when they were almost at their destination, Moldorf noticed the scouting party by the side of the road. They were in position earlier than expected. Halting his horse, he listened to their report.

"Ho," he gave a short grunt and looked towards the forest that lay ahead of them.

They were somewhat less than ten kilometres from Cherik. Apparently, at the centre of the forest was a reservoir which drew water from Lake Soma for the peripheral estates. As the space between the trees was narrow, it was also intended to slow down large enemy armies. Coming from the east, Taúlia's troops had gone around to the south of the forest and had currently set up camp with the woods at their backs.

Fast.

Ideally, Moldorf had wanted to attack the enemy before they had completed their battle formation. The troops were to have been divided in two, with one unit ambushing the enemy from the south while the other attacked from the north. He had thought that they had more than enough time but,

That's Ax for you, he moves well.

It seemed that the fleet-footed mounted units had marched first, that they had set up their formation and that they planned to wait for those following behind. They were also keeping a strict lookout, so the reconnoitring party was not easily able to approach either. To the rear of the troop headquarters, five hundred soldiers kept watch on the road from Taúlia. There was no oversight there either. Although they had spent the night on a gruelling march, even the movements of the lowest-ranking soldiers were visibly energetic. Moldorf was astounded.

They truly stood united. Such was the skill of Ax Bazgan and of the far-famed strategist Ravan Dol.

The time that Ax spent waiting here for those following behind also gave Cherik a reprieve. Moldorf's assessment was that if Cherik realised that it was at a disadvantage and surrendered, Taúlia intended to capture it without waiting to join up with the troops following behind.

It's a drastic strategy. I can only say that it's worthy of the inheritor of the Bazgan name.

Contrary to the feeling he had of wanting to praise the enemy, Moldorf held unspeakable fear and revulsion towards the sorcerer who was currently supposed to be his ally. Everything was going their way. And Moldorf couldn't see anything amusing about the fact that whatever the stratagem, readiness or determination, everything was completely powerless when facing the sorcerer.

At any rate, knowing about the reinforcements here, Cherik would soon – probably around dawn – send their troops and make a sortie. And Moldorf would take that opportunity to attack Taúlia's army from the rear.

"The king of Cherik is Yamka the Second, isn't he?"

"Yes?" The adjutant by Moldorf' side spoke up.

The army was a disjointed assembly both in terms of origin and composition, but Moldorf had gathered units from Kadyne around himself. He had known them long enough to remember the face of each and every soldier. After a moment, the adjutant nodded.

"He is young king. Still only about thirty or so."

“Was the fool dreaming?”

The adjutant didn’t reply at Moldorf’s wretched-sounding voice. Cherik had sinned by associating themselves with Garda. Unlike Kadyne, which had been stormed by Garda’s forces then had the lives of its people and princess taken as collateral to ensure obedience, in Cherik’s case, it was thought that King Yamka had cooperated with the sorcerer of his own accord.

Even though Cherik was comparatively rich thanks to the blessings of Lake Soma, it was still a small country after all. The one known as Garda might well be able to rewrite the power relations within the West at a single stroke, and the young king must have seen in that a way of realising his ambitions for Cherik.

Yamka must not be aware of what to expect from that sorcerer. Of the plight that Kadyne, Lakekish, Fugrum and Eimen are in.

Moldorf’s country, Kadyne, had succumbed almost exactly one month before Eimen fell. The officers and soldiers had not been negligent. As at the time, Lakekish and Fugrum in the north had already been captured, they had from the start recognised that Garda’s army would be no easy opponent. All the officers including Moldorf had exerted themselves to thoroughly reinforcing the city’s defence. Not even the tiniest ant could have passed through the formations arrayed along Kadyne’s outer walls.

And yet Kadyne fell in no time at all. Moldorf had been confident that they could repel every charge the enemy launched at them, but that was because he hadn’t imagined for a second that the enemy was inside the gates.

And furthermore, that enemy –

“Moldorf.”

While Moldorf had been deeply absorbed in his thoughts, a man on horseback had come up to him. In the style of a general from Lakekish, he wore a helmet with horns shaped like swords. With his narrow face and slanted eyes, his features were typically Zerdian.

“Why have you halted? Shouldn’t we attack?”

“I’m waiting for Cherik to make a move.”

“How relaxed of you. According to the scouts, there are at most five hundred guarding their escape route around the forest. If we overwhelm them in one go, we can strike at the main force.”

Can we overwhelm them? Moldorf wondered to himself. Thinking about it, there was the

enemy's high morale and the skill that he had guessed at just a moment earlier, while they on their part were no more than ill-assorted medley.

There was a risk that if they met with unexpected difficulties, the enemy's main force might move and this surprise attack would lose its effect. In order to protect their path of retreat, troops might come rushing from the main force and a great many enemy soldiers would put up a desperate fight. After all, Ax Bazgan was at that encampment.

On the other hand, if we make a large detour around those five hundred and advance towards the Taúlians, we might get slammed into by those behind.

"No," coming to a decision, Moldorf gave a broad shake of his head, "Even if we cut off their retreat, it's still better to wait for Cherik to make a move. Unless the enemy's attention is diverted, there is still a risk that they might withdraw. After all, we have to settle it with this battle. There's also the worry that if the enemy draws us into Taúlia, their ally Mephius might butt in."

"Hum. But if we wait here quietly, those following behind them might get here."

"Let them join up. If Cherik assails them at the same time, numbers won't be a problem."

"Have you lost your nerve, Moldorf? This is a golden opportunity, we could easily…"

"I was appointed commander-in-chief. If you can't follow me, then that's the same as disagreeing with Garda."

The man from Lakekish went pale. After which, he scowled at Moldorf with narrowed eyes exactly as though he were looking at Garda himself and turned his horse around. He went back to his subordinates. He must have said something sarcastic as the soldiers from Lakekish turned that way and laughed.

"Bastards."

"It's fine," Moldorf stopped the adjutant who was bristling with anger.

Moldorf's nature was by no means patient. But he felt that he could understand that commander's zeal, as well as his fear. Everyone there was deeply afraid of Garda. They had been robbed of their home. No one knew where the sorcerer's eyes and ears lay.

I too, have I also changed? No, it was impossible not to change. Even now, I fear neither swords nor bullets, but that sorcerer's ways are just too strange.

They were bundled together under the name of "Garda's army", but needless to say, their ranks had been swollen by absorbing soldiers during Garda's ineluctable march forward.

There were those from the mountain tribes that were rarely seen in central Tauran, soldiers from Lakekish, the first city-state that Garda had targeted, and soldiers from the cities of Fugrum, Eimen and Kadyne, cities that had likewise fallen.

When it came to fighting, they brandished their swords on Garda's orders and threw themselves into dangerous situations, but when the fighting was done, and despite the tight military discipline, their morale was naturally anything but high. At the time of Helio's fall, there were said to have been many who joined the Red Hawks mercenaries in looting the townspeople.

Even in our world of warring states, that didn't happen.

Although they might constantly be fighting, Zerdians had a strong sense of camaraderie. It couldn't be said that there had absolutely never been pillaging or massacres, but it was well understood that if the troops lost their discipline, it would bring misfortune to the townspeople. Time and time again, Moldorf had witnessed the rise and fall of countries, but he had always believed in strict control over himself and his companions.

If even I, who preached the ways of a warrior to my younger brother, were to fall into lawlessness, I would no longer have been able to face either my brother or my home country.

And so, when he fought for Kadyne, he had sternly warned his subordinates against such actions. Put differently, not even Moldorf's long military experience was enough to pull together an army that had swollen up to this extent.

Our numbers are high. And to save our birthplaces and our families, our ardour is fierce. But this army is fragile. Such was Moldorf's genuine assessment. Which was why he couldn't authorise an assault as things were. They would be able to crush Taúlia's army only if they performed a pincer attack together with Cherik.

Through the forest ahead, lights within the encampment could be seen to be moving. A large number of voices could be heard raised in shouts. Cherik had launched their offensive.

Cherik's army had sallied from the gate – having received that message, Taúlia naturally positioned themselves to counter-attack. Moldorf could feel a great many presences rustling through the forest.

Good. With this, the enemy will also move forward. Now is the time to cut off their retreat.

Behind the man known as the Red Dragon of Kadyne, the troops had also all at once taken on a tense air. A number of commanders lined up their horses on either side of Moldorf but he deliberately forced them to stand down with a wave of his hand.

Many among them were famous. Their expressions turned sullen.

“Those on that side will go around the forest and strike at the five hundred soldiers. We, the Kadyne troops, will wait for the right moment to join up with Cherik, break through the forest and act as vanguard,” Moldorf announced flatly.

“Wha-” the commander from Lakekish who had laughed at him a little while earlier seemed about to cut him off but,

“Do you want to say that I’m snatching the glory? Then tell me, where’s the glory in a fight like this?”

“…”

“Threatened by the sorcerer, forced to wield our swords as he tells us to on this kind of battlefield, how can there be honour or glory or even victory? Even if we defeat Ax himself, just what kind of fame is there to be had? Rather, we’ll be reviled by posterity as the sorcerer’s puppets.”

“Moldorf.”

“At any rate, a large army can’t break through the forest. A small number will go through the woods first and cause a disturbance among the enemy. In addition, we’ll cut off their path of retreat and with Cherik coming at them from the front, the enemy won’t be able to move.”

His voice was calm but it was all the more powerful because of it. Most of the commanders knew of Moldorf’s fierce fighting style. They would follow him after all.

While a number of officers and soldiers lined up their horses to take the path around the forest, Moldorf selected a few dozen mounted warriors and had them conceal themselves on that side of the forest. From the start, their surroundings were far from brightly-lit and the trees’ long shadows stretched over Moldorf’s face. Under his dragon-shaped helmet, a dark shadow fell across his eyes also.

The men and mounts in Taúlia’s encampment were growing increasingly active. Perhaps as part of a diversionary attack, a shot was fired and resounded throughout the dawn sky.

“General!” The adjutant cried out in surprise.

“Follow me!” Moldorf called out to his subordinates, but although it was a command issued to the entire troop, a lone horse rider suddenly went flying forward.

Having rushed his horse into the forest, Moldorf rode hard through the trees. The rising sun cast a faint, emerald light as it filtered through the leaves.

I'll end this.

The expression under his helmet was fierce as he spurred on his horse. Just as he had said to the commander from Lakekish, this battle had neither honour nor victory. No matter how much they might pride themselves on being upright and principled, being forced to fight against their will would sully the souls of warriors.

That being the case, the only way was to finish things as quickly as possible. If after this Garda did not keep his promise, if he kept the people imprisoned, if he continued to coerce the soldiers and forced them to fight new wars…

If that time comes, forgive me, my wife, my son, my daughter. Forgive me… Princess Lima. I will drive the entire army forward and march on Zer Illias. And this I swear, the Red Dragon's beard will be dyed crimson in his opponents' blood. Even if that means that you will be sacrificed and that it is your blood that will flow.

Moldorf passed out of the forest. As expected, Cherik's sortie had caused part of the defence to collapse. For a moment as he raced through, he saw the face of a youth who looked up vacantly towards him. One of the sentries. He parted his head from his neck and sent it whirling through the air. Once more readying the spear that had tasted first blood, Moldorf continued his charge.

A number of lights were lit on a slightly protruding hill. Taúlia's standard fluttered in the centre. Its design was the same as Zer Tauran's.

He saw the figure of a man bring out a folding stool and sit on it.

"Ax Bazgan!"

In shouting out, he was at least displaying a last bit of pride as a warrior. Belatedly noticing the rider fiercely approaching, the Taúlians tried to reach for their swords and spears, but they were easily blown away before Moldorf's onrush.

Panicking, Ax fell off the folding stool. Moldorf sharply kicked his horse's flank and readied the aim of his spear. He steadily approached the enemy figure. Ax wasn't even able to grab a sword. Blood spurted. As Moldorf's horse seemed to cut across the hill, Ax's head disappeared from the neck upwards as he grovelled on the ground.

But –

Wrong.

Moldorf felt an intense sense of incongruity. "That" was not Ax Bazgan. The atmosphere in

the enemy camp when he had set his aim and when he had actually decapitated his target were clearly different from what he had expected.

In that case – as Moldorf was about to turn his horse's head left and right, a huge shadow suddenly fell across him.

When he looked up, the large figure of a Sozos dragon was reflected in his eyes.

"Ho," the one who spoke from atop the Sozos' back was the strategist Ravan Dol. He was an old man whose body was as thin as a dead tree, but he handled dragons with admirable skill. "Surely that is Kadyne's Red Dragon? The fish we caught was much bigger than expected and we reeled it in, reeled it in."

Beating a wooden dais that had been set up on the dragon's back, Ravan did not look to be as merry as his words suggested. While "reeling it in" was good and all, this was in fact a situation in which it would have been better if they "had not needed to reel it in".

Ravan was in command of several dragons and had been making preparations to capture Cherik. They had lit fires some distance behind their real encampment and thus created a decoy "headquarters" in readiness of a surprise attack from the enemy. But still, that had only been on the unlikely off-chance that a few of Cherik's troops would come through the forest.

Yet here, beneath his eyes, was Moldorf.

Shit.

Intense regret welled up within him. The opponent was Garda's army which had set out from Helio. Ravan had calculated that they could advance on Cherik if they emptied Taúlia, but any way he had looked at it, he had not believed that reinforcements could possibly rush towards Cherik. If it had come to this, then it wouldn't only be a single military unit coming through the forest. The enemy would be fielding a far larger force.

But still…

Be that as it may, the enemy had moved fast. He had been sure that even if they were aiming for Taúlia, news of its battle with Cherik would not be reported to Helio until later. That meant that their movements had been leaked to the enemy but even so, there was still one point that remained unclear no matter how much he thought about it.

It was too fast.

Considering their relative positions, at about the same time as they had left Taúlia, the enemy should have been in Helio. With regards to the preparations for the march, he had been

vigilant to the point of over-cautiousness. He had severely restricted people's comings and goings from the city-state and had advanced his arrangements in such secrecy that even the people of Taúlia probably hadn't realised that they would soon be taking the field.

So why – worrying about that now wouldn't make any difference.

Ravan sent out three dragons. At that moment, the Kadyne cavalry unit, following Moldorf's charge, was approaching the "headquarters", but the horses took fright and dispersed as the large dragons ran towards them with earth-shaking vigour. Only one of them, Moldorf's horse, rushed around the Sozoses with unimpeded vigour, almost as though it was possessed by the soul of its rider.

"Ax, where are you? Show yourself!"

Moldorf shouted in a voice as loud as a dragon's roar. An arrow whistled past his cheek but he paid no mind to something so trivial.

"E-Enemies!"

"A sneak attack from Cherik?"

"It's the Red Dragon – the Red Dragon of Kadyne!"

Noticing the disturbance, the Taúlian troops lined up their spears and guns and took up defensive positions. From that point on, they were not imposters but guards protecting their headquarters.

But,

Retreating is the one thing we can't do.

Perhaps drawn in by Moldorf's spirit, the Kadyne unit that had for a moment been about to disperse showed signs of charging once more.

It was a fact that Ravan's eyes were quick to spot an opportunity. And that his decisions were fast. If the entire army had left Helio, the numbers would be comparable to theirs. Moreover, Cherik's troops were to their front. Any way he looked, they were at a disadvantage. Rather than wring his hands, Ravan would protect the headquarters by driving away the onrushing soldiers.

He sent a new signal to have his apprentices open the dragon cages and release several small-sized Fey dragons. By continuing to make use of the dragons to stall for time, they would allow Ax's main force to move east and, with the dragons as the rear guard, they would also halt the enemy's pursuit. He did not think that would dampen the enemies' spirits

as they now had Ax close at hand. Nevertheless, the large enemy army would probably turn their way in order to crush their path of retreat. They, the rear-guard, would probably – no, they would almost certainly – be annihilated.

In that moment, Ravan prepared himself for death. Although even he had already lost track of exactly how old he was, it had never occurred to him to wonder when he might die. As far as Ravan was concerned, to do so would be halfway towards greeting death. The dreams, ideals and goals that he needed to achieve were as numerous as the stars.

But if Ax Bazgan were to be defeated here, Taúlia, no, not only Taúlia but all the western lands, would fall into Garda's hands. More than all else, the one thing that Ravan could not lose was Ax himself. Because his dreams, his ideals and his goals were all of the legitimacy of the Bazgan House.

"Humph," Ravan half narrowed his ever sleepy-looking eyes. "Although there is still a mountain of things I need to teach them, it can't be helped. I'll have to hand over their training to someone else."

Be that as it may, the first thing to do was to kill the momentum of this surprise attack. Ravan had intended to dispatch a messenger but Moldorf, galloping without fear of the dragons, would not allow a single horseman through. He was no average commander. Inwardly, Ravan hurled violent hatred at the enemy general, but also, and above that, he heaped praise on him.

Moldorf too was prepared to die. If they could take Ax's head, it would be their win. Rather than turn away here, they would force their way further in. He calculated that if they plunged deep into the enemy line, Taúlia would not be able to use the dragons that were its strongest asset.

Spurring on the Sozos, Ravan sent continuous signals from the top of the dais and guided the Fey to chase after Moldorf. But even as the Fey bounded closer and the Sozos advanced with ground-shaking steps, man and horse, united as one, galloped on unperturbed.

Dammit.

Even Ravan the Strategist was starting to feel impatient.

With the Sozos chasing behind him, Moldorf leapt over the soldiers firing bullet at him, he cut down the swords and spears approaching him from either side and, within the crowd moving about confusedly – from the other side of an enemy soldier whose helmet he had sliced through lengthwise he finally caught sight of his prey.

"So you were there, were you? Ax Bazgan."

He raised the hand in which he held his sword towards the large man he had called out to.

Although all around him was nothing but gleaming spearheads as numerous as the enemy soldiers who brandished them, he charged on with unabated vigour. Moldorf roared in a voice loud enough to cross the battlefield and pitched his posture forward.

“My Lord!”

Ravan was going to pursue behind him when suddenly, blackish blood spouted from the back of the Sozos’ neck. Despite the infinitesimal probability of doing so, an enemy bullet had struck the point where its scales were the weakest.

The dragon’s giant body lurched sideways and Ravan was thrown from the dais.

“I’ve got it!”

The belief in victory gleamed within Moldorf’s eyes. He himself knew it to also be the herald of destruction. If Ax died, Taúlia too would fall and no one would be able to stop Garda’s invasion anymore.

This is –

More than two hundred years after Zer Tauran.

This was the end of the western lands.

Part 3

As he charged, Moldorf tore through the wind, tore through the glittering sunlight, through the surging crowd and through the screams.

Ax also pulled out his sword but it was already too late. Moldorf's readied spear was already in position to pierce his neck.

The finishing blow was about to be delivered. Then – just before he did so, an unexpected sound struck his ears.

Gunshots.

Certainly, that wasn't unexpected on a battlefield. Besides which, they were coming from a position far away from Moldorf's. He didn't think that the bullets would hit, but the gunshots that resounded were so orderly that it felt incongruous.

It should be too early for their allied troops to be in sight of the enemy sentries. In which case,

An enemy ambush?

After all, they had positioned a fake Ax in the decoy army which they had constructed at their rear. For a second, Moldorf suspected that every move they had made there might have been provoked by the enemy. The Ax before his eyes might well be another body double.

In some ways, Moldorf was too calm. As a general who had led countless soldiers over many years, he kept his eyes and ears on his surroundings even while in the middle of an assault, and because of that, in that moment, the force of his spear was slightly weakened.

And in that same moment, Ax's sturdy sword flashed upwards.

Sparks flew between Moldorf who was on horseback and Ax who stood on the ground.

At the same time, a large part of Garda's army was making the detour around the forest when suddenly they were struck by an attack from their flank.

The very gunshots that Moldorf had heard echoing caused many of the mounted warriors to be thrown from horseback with a clatter. The other horses bolted upright and while the soldiers were thrown into confusion, what they heard next was the reverberation of horses' hooves

advancing towards them.

“E-Enemies!”

An unknown cavalry was launching a charge from their side. Their momentum was like a loosed arrow and there was only time for a single shout of “Enemy” before the soldiers galloping in the van had pierced the chest of two, then three of Garda's soldiers with their spears.

Although Garda's army was numerous, the soldiers from the various countries were unable to move as one. Their reaction to the unexpected event was dull and, just as Moldorf had assessed, the army was fragile. Some turned their horse towards the forest and tried to escape through it; some got caught up in the charge and fell from their horse, or ended their lives pierced by a spear; some lost their judgement and attempted to flee as the enemy soldiers passed by their flank, and so were decapitated from behind by enemy swords.

The one leading the assault force was Lasvius, the commander of Helio's dragoons. About five hundred followed behind him.

He was a man whose forte primarily lay in leading operations that involved small or medium-sized dragons. There were currently no dragons left in Helio so he had of necessity ridden a horse into battle, but even so, his skill was far superior to the average cavalryman.

When Lasvius, who had led a deep thrust into the enemy ranks suddenly turned around to once more meet Garda's army head on, the cloud of dust that flew up was thick with blood.

“Calm down, calm down!” The general from Lakekish shouted angrily while quieting his horse which had bolted upright. “The enemy are few in number. Follow me!”

Although the troops' morale was by no means high, there were many far-famed commanders from each respective country. They were on the verge of gathering the various units in a coordinated strike at Lasvius' troops when,

“Guah!”

The soldier next to the Lakekishan commander was shot in the head and collapsed face forward from horseback. The commander cried out in surprise as a spurt of blood showered him the face.

“Wh-What!”

This time, it had come from behind.

Their white clothes fluttering in the wind, a group from the Pinepey tribe appeared. Most of

them had a gun on their shoulder as they raced forward. They were nomads who excelled at horseback marksmanship. Along with the innumerable gunshots, the top of their shoulders were momentarily wreathed in white gunpowder smoke. It was almost humorous how the soldiers of Garda's army scattered before them, unable to maintain their battle formation.

As the Pinepey drew closer and spread out on either side, from behind them appeared a new group of riders wielding swords and spears.

Leading them was a swordsman whose face was half covered by a mask.

Their momentum carried them rushing through the centre of Garda's forces which had fallen to the gunfire. Swords, spears and maces glittered in the light of dawn. Garda's soldiers were cut down without being able to react and were trampled by the horses. The sound of screams and the horses' hooves rose together, and the battlefield was filled with a bellowing reminiscent of a dragon's roars.

“Right, we're going too. Follow me!”

Lasvius brandished his spear and urged his men to charge once more. “Yeah!” the riders behind him shouted in response and he grinned inwardly as he jolted up and down on his horse.

That Orba, he thought.

The two-stage surprise attack was a plan that had been suggested by the masked leader of the other group of riders, Orba. Before leaving Helio, they had accurately foreseen that they would be far fewer in number than the enemy. Orba however had presented a plan to deliberately divide their troops into even smaller units. In doing so, it would conversely become difficult to gauge their numbers and the enemy would not be able to predict how many more attacks were still to come.

In reality, they were running out of bullets from this two-stage assault and the troops from Helio weren’t even seven hundred strong. Since Helio had only just fought the usurper king Greygun and the city was still in chaos, this was the most soldiers they had been able to scrape together. Furthermore, there had been no time to reorganise the troops, so their defence was fragile.

But the army led by Moldorf had the same weakness and on top of that, it had the added misfortune that Moldorf, who had in effect been entrusted with its command, had gone with the vanguard. Orders flew about in every local accent and it was impossible to tell who was handing down decisions to whom. Lasvius’ unit charged once more and Orba’s unit effortlessly cut down Garda’s army then plunged into the forest.

At their head, Orba smoothly galloped his horse to slip through the trees. A soldier from

Kadyne thrust at him from the side with a spear, but Orba easily sliced at the tip and sent it flying.

“Forward, forward!”

While he took command to hurry them through the forest, the leader of Garda’s army, Moldorf had Ax in his sights but had just missed him. Ax had tumbled backwards and he was going to pursue with another attack, but the Taúlian soldiers swarmed to stop him.

“Don’t get in my way!” He swung his spear from atop his horse.

With wild energy he mowed down another and yet another, blood spraying, while Orba’s horse-riding form approached from behind.

Clang – sparks flew. Moldorf managed to stop Orba’s sword thanks to his animal intuition and turned to look back at him with a ferocious expression. He opened his mouth so wide you could see into its red depths.

“So you’re still alive, you masked brat?”

“Unfortunately so.”

Orba and Moldorf circled around one another on horseback, jabbing repeatedly at each other. In the blazing white sunlight, the favoured weapon each held in hand glittered and clashed with the other’s.

In a head-on confrontation, Moldorf, who was proficient at fighting on horseback, had a huge advantage. But all around him were Taúlian soldiers thrusting spears at him from the ground and preventing him from overwhelming Orba.

Moreover,

“How much longer does a man like the Red Dragon of Kadyne plan on playing the sorcerer’s accomplice?” Orba shouted at Moldorf as sparks flew yet again.

“What!?”

“Right now, you should be rallying the western powers to destroy Garda. I don’t get it, how long are you going to be content to be Garda’s slave?”

“B-Bastard!”

Orba nimbly twisted his neck away just as Moldorf’s spear cleaved through the air right before him. If he had been just a fraction slower, the force of that strike would easily have torn off his head.

“What would you understand?”

“What I understand is something you should know too.” Orba continued to ridicule him. “Take your troops back to Kadyne. They’re undermanned over there. You can retake it.”

“Shut up, boy! Do you not understand that that will only cause the people who have been taken hostage to be injured in vain? And besides, it isn’t only the people of Kadyne, our princess, Lima Khadein, is in Zer Illias. But you keep flapping that mouth of yours as though you know everything.”

“And what if I keep flapping it? Your spear has been slicing nothing but air for a while now. You wouldn’t be able to bring down a single bird with that.”

Thanks to those words, Orba was able to gain an understanding of Moldorf’s circumstances, as well as of those of the soldiers serving in Garda’s army. Naturally, he had absolutely no way of knowing Kadyne’s situation from the outset. It was just an act to draw out the real motive.

The tip of a spear flew over the top of his shoulder with a whistling sound. They were surrounded by ten or twenty soldiers and it would be easy to lose a limb if one relaxed one’s attention.

“If it’s about your princess, then all the more reason.”

“What!”

One of Moldorf’s blows was about to pierce Orba’s mask. Just before that happened, a gleaming sword swept upwards and deflected it.

“There is no way that a princess wouldn’t lament that her home country had submitted to the sorcerer because she was taken hostage. Show true loyalty, Moldorf. Prove to your princess that Kadyne will not bow to the likes of Garda.”

“Y-You. You bastard!”

Moldorf’s face turned blood-red at the masked swordsman’s impudent words. He was no longer aiming to defeat Ax. His target was now Orba alone and, skilfully handling his horse, he cut down the distance between them.

Although Orba was forced into a defensive position, at that same time, his troops exited from the forest in a line and immediately crossed spears with Garda’s forces. The Taúlian army was also on the alert. Furthermore, the main body of Garda’s troops were still being held back by Lasvius’ unit.

Damn, Moldorf was forced into making a new decision.

However great their numerical advantage, it would be difficult to take back the momentum that had passed into their enemies’ hands.

What was especially problematic was that no sooner had Cherik's army, which had originally been the one to need the reinforcements, seen that those reinforcements were in difficulty than they had lost the vigour with which they had thrown open the city gates and flown out, and instead indecisively held back before even having crossed swords with the Taúlian troops.

“Bah!”

With a silent prayer, he swung his spear one last time and shattered Orba's sword. With that, his remaining regrets were all the more bitter and he glared piercingly into Orba's eyes before pulling on his reins with all his strength.

“Retreat. Retreat, retreat!” He cried out as he kicked his horse's flank, and even his voice sounded stained with blood.

Chapter 2: Tauran Advances

Part 1

The forest was by no means large and it was filled to overflowing during the rush to withdraw. Some were dragged down by the wave of people and were crushed underfoot by their allies’ horses. Every time a sword was swung, someone’s head flew, but even so, Moldorf ascertained a path of retreat and raced on with his spear in hand, weaving his way through the rain of swords to break through to the forest.

There, Moldorf joined up with the troops who had been sent to detour around the forest and briefly halted his horse in order to personally take up the rear guard. While covering his allies, they gradually retreated. Valiant warriors from all of the allied countries lined up on either side of him. Even now that he had decided they would flee, his spear was not one particle less relentless, and as they chased after their routed enemy, the men from Lasvius' unit were slaughtered one after another.

"Don't chase them too far!" Lasvius himself finally shouted out to restrain his allies. To reiterate, they too were not really in a position that allowed much coordination. It would only serve to increase the number of victims if each attacked haphazardly in order to earn achievements. Better after all to fire bullets or arrows from a distance.

It was quite effective, although Moldorf himself didn't have a single scratch. Before long, the entirety of Garda's army was headed northeast in a cloud of dust. For now, they intended to pass by the eastern side of Lake Soma to escape to Eimen or else to Kadyne.

The remaining Taúlian soldiers both inside and out of the forest raised a cry of triumph and saw in their comrades' faces the pride of knowing that Garda had been thwarted for the first time since the beginning of his invasion. They had won against Garda's forces.

Ax Bazgan heard their cry of victory as he was rubbing his lower back. His blood had of course run cold when he had seen Moldorf's spear approach, but now he struck a grand pose and accepted the soldiers' joyful voices.

Cherik's army withdrew in almost no time at all.

"Don't chase after them," Ax issued a strict command. "I will pass through Cherik's gates personally and in grand style. Even Yamka will have to accept it."

The news wasn't all good. The worst of the damage that the Taúlian forces had suffered had been inflicted when Moldorf had charged alone, but what caused Ax's expression to cloud over was that the strategist Ravan Dol had been caught up in it. Apparently, when the strategist was flung from the dragon's back, he had slammed into the ground with his entire body and had lost consciousness. He was breathing, but his age was what it was. It was impossible to say what his condition was.

Because theirs had been a march that privileged speed, there were few non-combatants in the first wave of troops that Ax was leading. The artillery and infantry troops following behind should have doctors with them, so until they arrived, a tent was set up for the strategist to rest in.

Lasvius went towards Ax. That Taúlia had made a move was largely because of the letter from Bouwen Tedos who had been under Lasvius' protection.

"As expected of one who has inherited the blood of the Bazgan family. Taúlia's cooperation was essential for gaining the first military achievements against Garda."

"What? The western lands were those ruled by the Bazgan family. We wouldn't not move to protect them."

His manner of speaking got on Lasvius' nerves somewhat and an unpleasant expression crossed his slender face, but no word of criticism passed his lips. Ax didn't particularly notice.

"It was because the loyal retainers of Helio did not give up on retaking it that we achieved success. You have my thanks."

So saying, he offered a handshake.

What a strange man, that thought was written on Lasvius' face as he returned the handshake. He had an arrogant side and an affable side that coexisted without contradicting each other. *Ah, or isn't it...*, he almost smiled as a thought struck him. In short, Ax Bazgan was like a child. He was exactly like the swaggering leader of a neighbourhood gang of kids.

Afterwards, Lasvius issued orders to his subordinates and had them bring Orba over. Shique was with him and Ax recognised his face as that of the messenger who had arrived in Taúlia just a few days ago. Furthermore, that messenger had originally been a mercenary hired by Taúlia and he had heard that before that, he had been a gladiator in Mephius, so Ax's expression showed somewhat mixed feelings.

However, that did not change the fact that when Bouwen had fled the battle at the Coldrin Hills, they had protected him to the last without abandoning him. Lasvius had wanted to introduce Orba to Taúlia's governor-general but time was short.

"We'll hold a party later. I'll be giving you a reward but if you're expecting something big, it might be a problem in these troubled times," Ax smiled jocularly.

After that, while waiting for the troops following behind, they rested in the area around the forest. Naturally Ax had the soldiers take up battle formations in turn and scout their surroundings at all times. Incidentally, he had sent a messenger post haste to those behind to inform them of the situation and to order a third of them to return to Taúlia. It was not that he was taking Cherik lightly, but it was in case Garda's temporarily routed army changed its objective and headed there instead.

Meanwhile, Orba was with Shique and Gilliam, who he knew of old, and with the mercenaries Talcott and Stan, when they heard a voice say,

"Mephian dogs."

The one who was insulting them so as to be deliberately overheard was a man who was giving instructions to the sentries posted a little way from where they were. Judging from his equipment, he was a soldier from Helio. Moreover, he seemed to be of the rank of battalion commander as he had a tassel attached to the top of his pointed, Taúlian-made helmet and a short mantle hanging from his right shoulder.

"I don't know if it was on Lasvius' orders, but they're getting full of themselves for having commanded the detached force. A man who's more like a boy and who can't show his face. Since when has Helio been so short-handed that we need to rely on slaves?"

"Yo, Shique," said the gigantic Gilliam while poking a finger in his ear. "I can't make out this western accent. Are they picking a fight with us?"

"Leave it, maybe it's a mistake," Shique appeared to chide him in a gentle voice that matched his feminine appearance, but his words as he spoke loud enough to let them hear were far from gentle. "See, if you take out a sword and thrust it at them, they will surely apologise and snivel that 'It's a mistake, there's been a misunderstanding so please forgive us.' When that happens, we'll be the ones left feeling awkward."

That was rare for Shique. As for Orba, he turned his face in Cherik's direction without saying a word. As was his habit when he was lost in thought, he fixed his eyes on a single point without moving, without even so much as blinking.

"That man, I know him by name," Talcott said afterwards in a low voice. "Surūr Wyerim, the commander of Helio's infantry battalion. He seems to be in a bad mood but don't provoke

him too much. Apparently he's more capable than he looks." As he was saying that, the look in his eyes seemed somewhat amused by the situation.

Regardless, no further incident occurred and the troops following behind joined up with the main force. A messenger came galloping up just as Ax was about to start moving. When he heard his report, he snorted loudly. "So it's finally come? I was starting to wonder if I would seriously have to march in there."

An envoy from Cherik had arrived.

Elsewhere, in far distant Taúlia.

"What?" Raswan Bazgan's cruel-looking face wore an expression of astonishment. "Is this true?"

"Yes…" As he answered, the old sorcerer raised both his palms to the level of his chest and placed them over a strangely shaped crystal ball. It was in the form a skull that had horns and a somewhat elongated snout. While peering into it, he continued, "It appears that soon after our troops left Helio, the soldiers of Helio's royal family recaptured the city. From there, it seems that reinforcements rushed to Taúlia's aid and they probably caught Moldorf's force in a pincer movement. Although I have not seen the outcome, so it is possible that Moldorf managed to prevail against the odds."

"Why?"

"It seems that a man named Lasvius hid in the Belgana Summits along with his subordinates…"

"Not that!" Raswan barked with a thoroughly irritated expression. "*Why* didn't you convey news of Helio's fall to Moldorf's troops? Aren't you capable of instant communication no matter how far apart you may be? If he had had known that reinforcements were coming from behind, Moldorf could have acted."

"None of our comrades accompanied Moldorf's force. We too are limited in number," the sorcerer's answer was concise. It held no impatience nor regret nor apology.

Raswan's lips trembled, but,

"Do not be hasty," the old man's voice was cold.

Although Raswan's brain was boiling with anger, he froze instantly. However, he was a man who had steeled himself and who was prepared to turn his blade against his own father. He drew his brows together and scowled deeply at the other.

“If we lose the opportunity to act it will all come to nothing. But with whatever sorcery you lot possess, doing something like changing history is so easy that…”

“Indeed. There is nothing more important than a good opportunity,” the sorcerer interrupted Raswan’s words, “and when it comes to opportunities, there will be as many as one likes later. But it will be over if we fail. My master Garda has great expectations of your assistance, Lord Raswan, so please do not lose your temper and destroy the chance that more opportunities will come your way.”

“S-So you are saying that there is no worry that the countries of the west will join hands and engulf Garda then.” Raswan was anxious that he not be taken lightly. Garda had said that he would leave Taúlia in his hands but he was not so naive as to leave it at that. In preparation for when he became governor-general, he had to keep in mind how to place himself on equal terms with Garda, who would have subdued most of the western lands.

Nnh, as Raswan’s violent expression shattered, the blood drained from his dark brown skin.

The sorcerer didn’t say a thing. He only laughed. A soundless laugh.

A moment later, he repeated his words, “Do not be hasty.”

In the end, Raswan Bazgan had no choice but to postpone making his move in Taúlia. As he looked out the window at the streets of Taúlia that were entirely bathed in the light of dawn, Raswan persuaded himself that it was a sign that his luck still held that his notification had not yet reached the soldiers and that they were still unaware of the situation.

Part 2

“Garda tricked us,” at the meeting set up within Cherik’s castle, King Yamka the Second made his appeal in tears. Invited there were Ax and several commanders. Representing Helio were Lasvius and his second-in-command from the Dragoon Corps.

“You were tricked. And you think that explains everything?” If Ravan Dol had been at the meeting, he would have rebuked his master at that point, but unfortunately the elderly strategist was still unconscious. Ax’s stern face was flushed scarlet. “The fact that Cherik joined hands with Garda is a fact proven beyond doubt. Let’s hear your reasons, what kind of sweet promises tempted you and what the hell were you thinking mobilising your soldiers and turning your bayonets against my Taúlia?”

“W-We didn’t think that we would be setting ourselves up against Taúlia. That was, those soldiers at the border were only there to protect the country after we heard that Helio had fallen and…”

“In that case, you sure moved quickly. Your soldiers left Cherik with amazing speed and took up formation by the border before the battle at the Coldrin Hills had even ended.”

Ax jabbed at him with his words. His head down, Yamka passed his hands through his thinning hair over and over again, then, wiping his sweat away,

“Garda’s forces sent me a threatening letter. Attack Helio from behind or you will be the next target. Naturally I didn’t give in to that threat. We mobilised our soldiers to show Garda Cherik’s military might. But that was what they were aiming for. So that they could pretend that Cherik and Garda truly had joined hands and have you, Lord Ax, misunderstand, thus blocking Taúlia’s movements.”

“Oh ho,” Ax scrutinized Yamka the Second’s face which had been pallid when they had entered the room but which had become red as he spoke. The words he had marshalled together seemed reasonable enough but,

If that was Garda’s plan, it was really crude. He couldn’t have predicted how Cherik would react after he’d simply threatened them. Ax was aware that without Ravan there, his own personality might play to his disadvantage. *Dammit. Should I leave it at that? No, if I press on here I should be able to draw out some information about Garda*.

He was truly poor at detailed negotiations like these. When Ax fell silent, the room, naturally, could only also be wrapped in silence. Sunlight flooded through the window. Because it was so extremely bright, each and every speck of the dust that enveloped the room was plainly

noticeable and Lasvius, who was by nature fastidious about cleanliness, had been making a sour face for some time.

Yamka II desperately scrutinized the two men's expressions.

Incidentally, the Taúlian soldiers had currently set up camp in the outskirts of Cherik. It couldn't really be said that they created an oppressive atmosphere. This was an example of Ax's magnanimous personality. Having sounded Yamka out, he had allowed Cherik to hold a small banquet in welcome to Taúlia's soldiers. Several people serving in high office in Cherik were also taking part.

Ax guessed that the people of Cherik and the common soldiers probably hadn't been aware of their country's connection to Garda. Although power rivalries were constant in the western lands, Cherik, just like Taúlia, was a country that had been born when Zer Tauran split apart. The countries that had handed down Zer Tauran's customs and traditions still shared a unique bond so that even if they had been at war until just the day before, they would immediately stand shoulder to shoulder against a foreign enemy. As such, Cherik would not easily have accepted the presence of Garda, he who had thrown the West into disarray.

Therefore, just as Yamka had said, was it not likely that the soldiers truly have been given instructions to "Strike at Garda's army as it comes from Helio"?

From here on, Cherik would become an important base against Garda. Because of that, Ax didn't want to harm its people or make them feel any warier than necessary. Which also meant that he couldn't cut the king, Yamka II, too deeply either.

Tsk, Ax gave another small click of his tongue and changed the subject by asking Lasvius about the situation in Helio.

Lasvius gave a matter-of-fact account of the succession of misfortunes that had befallen Helio, from the defeat at Eimen and King Elargon's death in battle to the civil war that had arisen within the country.

"Were those who rose in rebellion tricked by Garda?"

"At this point in time there's no way to verify that, but perhaps it's possible."

Lasvius then talked about how the mercenary commander called Greygun who had been invited to Helio had been connected to Garda and bout how he had betrayed his allies at the battle at the Coldrin Hills.

"Greygun, huh?"

As Ax gave him a brief look, the king of Cherik coughed violently and turned the other way.

Greygun, the commander of the Red Hawks mercenary group, had originally been a man employed by Cherik. Trouble had arisen between him and Yamka, and he had been expelled from the country. The whole sequence of events of how he and his seven hundred soldiers had then been hired by Helio was unnatural. Considering the connection between Yamka and Garda, it was more plausible to suppose that rather than them falling out, Yamka had sent Greygun to destroy Helio from inside.

Even though Lasvius' feelings towards Yamka were anything but kind, not a hint of those emotions coloured the commander of Helio's dragoons' sharp features. He too probably realised the importance of Cherik's role in the future. He kept an iron self-control over himself.

There's no helping it, we'll have to put off dealing with Cherik until later, Ax decided, feeling unamused. Everything would have to wait until after they had gotten rid of Garda's army. It wasn't too bad if he thought that after this, he would hold the means to gain the upper hand in negotiations with Cherik. Perhaps he would be able to seize some of the management rights to the rich granary region around Lake Soma.

"Garda's army that we fought today. They were the units stationed at Helio. What was their actual condition?"

"Bluntly, they were a mish-mashed troop. Just like in Helio, they all seemed to obey Garda because their people have been taken hostage."

"A strange tale. With that way of doing things, even if they were to annihilate all enemy powers, they wouldn't be able to govern. What is Garda thinking?"

"Well who knows. But..."

"But?"

"Isn't that precisely Garda's weak point?"

As he quietly made that assertion, Lasvius' expression, which had until then been as cold as ice, thawed as though from the intensity of his emotions and changed into something that was yet neither anger nor joy.

"For the people, even if their home country is overthrown, even if the ruler changes, as long as their living conditions improve afterwards, they will adapt to the new system and the new country name. But since there is no government, the people's hearts remain constantly wrapped in anger. They yearn for their country's name, they await the day when their true royal family will reclaim the throne, and if they can't bear to wait, they raise their fists themselves. There's no doubt that Kadyne, Eimen and the others in Garda's power are just as we in Helio were. So if today's military accomplishments of ours were to spread throughout

the West, it could become our one great opportunity."

"To topple Garda's army?"

"Yes."

Only Yamka II seemed uneasy at hearing the vigorous conversation between them and stayed apart from the two who had immediately started talking about defeating Garda. So the demon fell, he thought to himself as though it was someone else's business.

What he had told Ax was of course complete nonsense. He had most certainly forged a connection with Garda. But now, he was not entirely sure about his motives for linking himself to the sorcerer.

One reason why Yamka had concealed the truth from Ax was of course because he had been thinking of Cherik's future, but the true reason why he couldn't openly admit to it was because,

If I tell others, they'll mock me for a fool.

One night, more than half a year ago, Yamka II had seen a dancing girl in a dream. With her elegant dancing and her somewhat strong beauty, she fit Yamka's tastes more than any woman he had ever seen before and so perfectly matched his ideal feminine image that he believed their meeting was surely ordained by the Dragon Gods.

After she had finished performing her dance, Yamka had sex with her within his dream.

"You my lord will one day be the one to rule the southern half of Tauran," the dancing girl had whispered in his ear. He heard more such idle talk after their intimate liaison. But when he awoke from the dream and as he was savouring the vivid memory of it, the dancing girl's whispered words reawakened Yamka II's half-forgotten desire for supremacy.

Could it be a prophetic dream sent by the Dragon Gods? Just as he was wondering that, a troupe with a certain dancing girl had visited Cherik.

"I received an invitation from his lordship," she had announced when she appeared at the castle gate. Yamka had summoned her before him with uncontrollable curiosity and expectation. And sure enough, she and the dancing girl in his dream were like two peas in a pod.

The dancing girl gave her name as Tahī. What happened after that was like a continuation of the dream for Yamka and he only had a hazy memory of it. Tahī herself had vanished just before Yamka launched his military operation, leaving only the words, "I will visit again later," behind her.

Was she just an illusion? He wondered, now that the entire plan had collapsed as it had.

“But there’s no explaining it,” the discussion that Cherik’s king had stopped paying attention to continued. Ax groaned, his arms crossed. “Those guys advanced their army after us, who were headed to capture Cherik, and not towards Taúlia which was empty. It’s hard to imagine that they could have seen through Ravan’s plan so easily. You could always say that at about the same time as the troops left Taúlia, spies lurking in the city sent them that information, but even then…”

“The information travelled fast.”

“Too fast. What kind of method did they use?”

He gave another quick glance towards Yamka, silently asking if he didn’t have any information about Garda relating to that. Actually, Ax had been seized by the thought of asking him directly: *Hey, how did you contact Garda* but seeing that Yamka’s face had gone pale again and that he was shaking his head, he probably hadn’t been informed about it in any detail.

You worthless excuse of a man. How could you trust a guy without knowing his real intentions, the arts he uses or his real nature?, he wanted to yell. He swallowed back his emotions however.

“Those bastards don’t use flames and whirlwinds to destroy armies like in the legends, but it’s worth thinking that they might use some even more terrifying techniques,” he said.

Since each of their movements were in danger of being seen through, at the very least they could say that it wouldn’t be a war in which they could overwhelm their opponent with superior force of numbers.

Given our victory in this fight, how will the other Tauran countries move? They would need time to ascertain that.

After that and once he had left Cherik castle, Ax, along with Lasvius, went to show his face at the banquet.

The soldiers from Cherik who were acting as their escorts stood to attention. For their part, they probably had the feeling that the misunderstanding with Taúlia had been resolved. But even if they were to hold official peace negotiations sometime soon, Ax, was not exactly happy. He had after all almost been driven into a truly desperate situation.

“This way,”

After chatting with the soldiers for a while, Lasvius led Ax to a different place. He had chosen several soldiers beforehand from those who had raced in reinforcement with him and had invited them to a bar in Cherik. He had a governmental official from Cherik prepare a carriage and headed there with Ax.

The sun was almost at its zenith, but the sky had gone grey, clouds had appeared and an unpleasant wind was blowing.

The carriage, with a dozen brawny soldiers following behind it, pulled up in front of a large bar on Cherik's main street.

There were very few places where women could work in Cherik so unlike other countries, there were no women waiting at the tables. As he walked into a rather squalid room where the paint was chipped, a crease appeared between Ax's brows.

Regardless, the soldiers that Lasvius had chosen were in a secluded part of the shop. They were the mercenaries that included Orba.

Ax Bazgan.

From behind his mask, Orba observed the man who approached towards them. As the mercenaries rose from their seats one by one, he lowered his eyes a little. There was no need to speak of it again now, but Orba had been the body double of the Mephian empire's crown prince and had himself commanded soldiers. Where the southwest of Mephius bordered Taúlia, the countries had crossed swords and he had met Ax Bazgan face to face at that time. Because of that, now that he had taken off the 'mask' of Gil Mephius, he didn’t really want to talk too closely with him. And so, he had intended to remain silent there, but –

“I didn't have much time earlier, but I forgot to give my thanks for saving Bouwen, huh? You rendered great efforts for Taúlia’s sake. And you played a key part in our victory this time too.”

“We didn't do anything.”

Opening his mouth, Orba was vexed at his own timing. Any way you looked at his attitude, he was being arrogant for a mercenary.

Having drawn everyone's attention to himself and while ignoring Gilliam, whose face was scowling *Again*, Orba spoke.

“The ones who saved General Bouwen, as well as ourselves, were Captain Duncan and Taúlia’s soldiers.”

“This fellow's attitude is sometimes somewhat misguided. Please try to forgive him,” Lasvius smothered a smile.

“What? You were originally a mercenary hired by Taúlia. You don't need to stand on ceremony,” Ax looked at the masked man with displeasure stamped across his features but then he gave a single nod. “Is that right? Duncan, huh.”

Naturally, Ax had also been informed of the death of Duncan, who had been attached to the Fifth Army Corps as commander of the mercenaries.

“He was a good man. Eventually I was planning to have him command regular soldiers rather than mercenaries.”

“He was a splendid warrior,” Shique lowered his head as he spoke. “Captain Duncan entrusted his last wish to the likes of we mercenaries, that we protect General Bouwen to the end.”

Ax closed his eyes for a moment for Duncan and those killed in the war.

“In these wretched times we live in, we can't even stop to mourn the dead. First of all, I need to think of someone to replace him. And also, we want every capable man we can get.”

While in the carriage on their way there, Ax had heard the details of Helio's recapture from Lasvius. Fixing his gaze on the masked swordsman once more, Taúlia’s governor-general said something that made every one of the mercenaries doubt their ears:

“You said your name was Orba, right? How about it, will you take over the platoon?”

Lasvius stifled a laugh again as even Orba blinked behind his mask.

“Me... No, I [1], you mean?”

“That's right. Fifty mercenaries. It's not much but we'll gather more. We should be able to prepare ten of the new model riffles. We'll also round up as many horses as possible.”

“Wh-Why me?”

“You can think of it as a reward for one thing, but that’s not all. You can’t lead mercenaries by enticing them with honour and prestige. Nor can you encourage them to all be reckless heroes only interested in increasing their wages. What you need above all else is someone who can act as a unifying force for them.”

Ax’s words were a lot like what Duncan used to say. It had been a way for Duncan to sell his own abilities as someone who could do that, but ever since back then, Ax had thought that it

was something that made sense.

“Even if we quit being mercenaries now, we’ll be rolling in money from this time’s work. But if we earn feats leading a mercenary unit, we can double, no triple, those funds,” the one who was rejoicing the most was Talcott. Overhearing what was being said from where he was drinking a little apart from Ax, he whispered, “Taúlia’s general is generous. How about it, Stan, can you see a bright future ahead?”

“It’s no good for this, Brother. Unless I’m looking straight at a battlefield, I don’t get any premonitions.”

Orba on the other hand dropped his gaze to the table. When he had been the Mephian crown prince’s replacement, he had routinely given orders to large numbers of people and he had experience in leading soldiers. But that was already like something from long ago.

Thinking about it, I was naïve.

If someone were to hear him, they would probably laugh at him for indulging in such an insolent daydream. But those were Orba’s true feelings. He had been given soldiers, he had gotten drunk on the power to move them around and he had meddled with wars as he wanted. But –

Brother.

Even now, he was haunted by the feeling of how his heart had seemed to stop when, bathed in the light of the setting sun in Apta, he had gazed at an engraving on sword. Carved onto the blade which was thrust into the ground in place of a grave-marker was the name ‘Roan’.

Roan had been conscripted from the village as a soldier and had breathed his last on the battlefield. The officers in charge of the operation probably hadn’t even known his name.

To those who employed soldiers, the rank-and-file troops were known only by numbers. But each of them had a family. They had lived life until then. At some point, wearing the mask of Prince Gil, Orba had almost come to forget something so obvious.

He who should have hated those in power had almost become like them. When he achieved his personal revenge against Oubary Bilan, from the bottom of his heart, Orba grew disgusted at the self-contradiction/paradox he was caught in. And so, he abandoned his future as crown prince and his feet carried him here, west to Tauran.

Now, even if he were in a position to manage soldiers again, he wouldn’t turn into the same as then, would he? He wouldn’t be deliberately picking up the mask he was supposed to have thrown away and be awkwardly filled with contradictions, would he?

“How about it?” Ax asked once more. Orba lifted his gaze. There was another arrogant pause. Orba looked straight into Ax’s face.

He was a descendant of Yasch Bazgan, who had once founded Zer Tauran in these western lands. Looking up at him like this gave him a different impression of his features than when he had met him as the prince.

Taúlia’s king. A king?

The uncomfortable silence continued. Ax’s eyebrows twitched convulsively. Just as Shique was about to start saying something,

“I gladly accept,” Orba agreed to the proposal with those few words. Ax grinned and personally poured wine into Orba’s cup.

While taking it with a respectful attitude, he thought,

I’ll defeat Garda and bring this battle to a close. Isn’t that what I’ve already decided?

With his own eyes he had seen death coming for Duncan, the captain of the mercenaries, and he had witnessed Queen Marilène of Helio’s determination and her fate. There had been many “Roans” on the battlefield where he himself had fought. And also, there was the youth from Garda’s army who had been forced to fight because his family had been taken hostage.

Orba’s eyes, which were apt to hold a dark gleam, now shone with a secret and fierce new light.

Part 3

The wind was changing in the west.

It was about half a month since the battle at the outskirts of Cherik. When they learned of how the combined forces of Taúlia and Helio had defeated Garda's troops, the various countries of Tauran received almost as great a shock as they had when the sorcerer's invasion began in earnest.

Taúlia and Helio had reaffirmed their alliance and the two countries had exchanged letters with Cherik confirming their friendly relations from there on. Each of the small countries scattered across the northern Abbas Great Plains – most of which had sprung up from nomadic tribes – also sent messengers to Helio confirming that they would ally themselves with them. Messengers on fleet horses came running even from Altak, the southernmost state of Tauran, which stood at the edge of the desert and the wilderness west of the Numelda Gorge, which bordered Cherik.

Throughout the west, countless armed soldiers could be seen coming and going along the highways that had been trade routes at the time of the former Zer Tauran.

Partly in order to sweep away the rumour that they had been tied to Garda, Cherik, in which many from the various states had gathered, actively reached out to them and unreservedly served the soldiers stationed there with the abundant food that they had in reserve thanks to the blessings of Lake Soma. It was said that three of Cherik's huge granaries were emptied within that half month.

During that time, the enemy made no move.

Garda remained secluded in Zer Illias and neither were there any conspicuous movements from Kadyne or Eimen, although they would probably be the first targets once the allied western forces took action. Rumours flew that the leaders of Garda's army were in disarray after suffering their first defeat in the outskirts of Cherik, but no one knew if that was true.

In that time of course the kings and military commanders of the west sent innumerable spies and scouts to the regions under Garda's control, but as not a single one of them returned, they didn't receive even a single report.

For his part, Orba, now the commander of a mercenary platoon, received his official military uniform once he returned to Taúlia. Bouwen Tedos, the commander of the Fifth Army Corps which Orba was attached to, was currently undergoing medical treatment. Besides which, the mercenary corps, starting with its captain, Duncan, as well as the platoon leaders ranked

lower than vice-captain, had all been killed at the battle at the Coldrin Hills. Therefore, the name of ‘Fifth Army Corps’ barely made sense as it was hardly functioning as an army division at that point in time.

So instead, Orba had had to recruit men from the mercenary unit under Toún Bazgan, the general in charge of Taúlia’s defence, as well as to establish his position as a captain of mercenaries and to organise his subordinates. They were fifty-three in total. A reasonably high number for a platoon. Amongst them, to say nothing of Shique, Gilliam, Talcott and Stan, there was also Kurun, the apprentice soldier from Lasvius’ unit.

“The commander kicked me out,” Kurun laughed, his features still retaining a trace of childishness. Needless to say, he wasn’t from Taúlia. That he had crossed the border to be hired as a mercenary there was perhaps proof that the west was changing. “He told me I should come and learn about actual combat under you for a while. Although it hasn’t been long, he really has a high opinion of you, huh.”

“What a flirt,” Shique said surreptitiously. His face was haughty and he had a somewhat a threatening atmosphere.

“There’s no way I’m calling you ‘captain’,” said Gilliam, an opinion that Talcott agreed with.

Despite all this, Orba’s subordinates received good wages. Because they had money, they went pub crawling every night. Once when Shique went with them, he noticed something strange.

“Those two are going drinking together a lot.”

“So what?” The sun was setting over the training ground and Orba handed over his horse to a page attached to the platoon. Having endured Orba’s rough and violent riding style until just now, the horse was looking haggard. “Gilliam is quick-tempered as you know. Talcott is excitable. Normally, they don’t get on all that well and they often get rowdy even just drinking alone. Gilliam is quick to raise his fists to other people and Talcott makes fun of others and gets them mad.”

“So you’d think those two would start fighting from the start.”

“Exactly,” a smile spread across Shique’s entire face. “You could call it something like affinity in liquor. When they’re together, oddly enough they hold each other’s flaws in check. Gilliam laughs off Talcott’s sarcasm like a funny joke and in some ways Talcott is really good at lifting Gilliam up.”

Although he hadn’t been asked to, Shique described the two’s relationship to Orba.

Because the physically very strong Gilliam brushed off Talcott’s nonsense, other people also

found it easy to take it as a joke even if Talcott was bad-mouthing them. Also, for Gilliam, each of Talcott's jokes seemed to hit the mark. That being the case, instead of laying the place to waste, he pulled his surroundings into his enjoyment.

Because of that, Shique had cleverly gotten the mercenaries who were Orba's new subordinates to take it in turns to go out with the two of them every night. Although compared to the regular soldiers the mercenaries came from a variety of origins, most of them were still Zerdians. There would have been plenty of them who held no kind feelings towards Mephius, their enemy since the time of Zer Tauran.

"When gossip-mongering Talcott gets drunk, he'll also start to insult Mephius. And Gilliam sitting with them might also make for a good buffer. If they grumble among themselves that the captain is a masked brat and blow off steam together, it will be easier to bring them together as a group, don't you think?"

"Is that so?"

Orba didn't comment on whether it was a "good" or a "bad" idea. When Shique had finished talking, he turned to the page and saying "Another horse," he had him get a new one ready for him.

Shique looked surprised. Orba had already spent the entire day training with a spear on horseback.

"How long are you going to do that for?"

"I won't say 'until I can compare to Moldorf' but I should at least get more or less used to it."

Riding his fresh horse, Orba galloped across the training ground. Shique followed him with his eyes for a while until Orba's figure was far in the distance, then he suddenly burst into loud laughter. The nearby page was startled and stared at this mercenary whose face looked like a woman's. He was laughing as though he had desperately been holding it in until now.

"D-Did you see his face while I was talking to him?" He asked while tapping him on the shoulder, although the page couldn't possibly have seen the face of a man who was wearing a mask. Shique laughed until he was crying. "He was in a much worse mood than usual. Well, there's no helping it if he wasn't happy that he hadn't thought of my idea himself. Since he's always, always the one to come up with the plans, he was definitely thinking about how to smooth things out with his new subordinates. And here his dear and esteemed wife Shique had already sorted things out."

It was less than a week after he had finished organising his unit that Orba, having returned to Taúlia with Ax, now left for Helio before Ax did.

The military might of the various countries was converging on Helio in much the same way as it was on Cherik. There, the streets were like an exhibition presenting the various types of Zerdians, with the figures of nomads with no settled dwelling being especially conspicuous. Incidentally, most of the nomads pitched their tents outside the city walls where they also hunted freely and performed their training.

Orba's unit would see its first service there. Their duty would be to serve as guards along the road from the Coldrin Hills to Helio. It wasn't only soldiers who were coming and going: lines of pack animals with goods piled high on their backs as well as crowds of people gathered, and many caravans were expected to arrive.

There were no attacks from the enemy.

It was a tedious duty since Helio's army was also cautiously keeping a close watch, but meanwhile, whenever a caravan travelled through, Orba would talk with them and buy maps of the Tauran regions from them. They covered the entire western region, from maps focussed only on the areas surrounding Kadyne or Eimen to ones hand-drawn by the travellers that showed the byways and secret paths through the mountains and valleys.

"Have you taken up map collecting?" Talcott teased as he happened to peer at what Orba was holding in his hand. "Oh, the guy you bought from earlier really did an outstanding job. That's the old place name being used there, look, and the landscape features are drawn wrong. I'm pretty sure I could do better job at drawing that."

Just as he said, Talcott had some artistic talent. Whenever he went to a bar in town, he would come on to women who caught his fancy by drawing their portrait.

Speaking of Helio, there was an eatery there which Orba, Talcott and the others all visited together on the day they first crossed over the border from Taúlia. It as a small place managed by just two people, a young woman named Kay and her younger brother Niels. It was there that Orba and the others had gotten into trouble with some of Greygun's men, mercenaries from the Red Hawks.

It should have ended as just an ordinary brawl, but of all things Helio had fallen under the rule of Greygun and his Red Hawks. Because of that, Shique had been openly worried about what might have happened to the eatery. Soldiers acting as though the town were theirs might have attacked the shop and kidnapped Kay.

And so they had stopped by there for the first time in a long while, but the door was locked and when they peered through the window, the inside looked deserted. Just as they were all starting to feel uneasy, a voice called out to them from behind.

"Ah, it's you!"

The woman wearing a red headscarf was none other than Kay. She was holding a bag of food in her hand.

Answering their questions, she explained that as soon as they had heard that Greygun had rebelled and seized the throne, the siblings, naturally fearing for their own safety, had gone to take shelter at the house of one of their regular customers who ran a general store. That store handled everything from ordinary groceries to swords and armour which had been repaired after being abandoned on the battlefield, and it was comparatively prosperous. Kay said that with his help, they were planning to reopen the eatery soon. Incidentally, the "he" in question was standing next to Kay and holding bags like her.

"Oh-ho, that's good," Talcott crinkled his nose as it was obvious even to an outsider that Kay and the man didn't have just an ordinary relationship.

At any rate, that evening they toasted the eatery's planned reopening. They toasted Helio's recapture and toasted Orba's inauguration as platoon leader. The drinks flowed merrily the entire time, but Talcott didn't get drunk as he usually did and by the end, he was crying into Gilliam's broad chest.

"I'm amazed," whispered Shique. "Maybe he was actually serious about Kay."

Holding his wine cup, Stan shook his head.

"Brother is always serious."

Talcott and Stan had known each other for a long time. He was probably used to such scenes.

And so, the night turned into the next day.

An unexpected visitor showed up at the Helian garrison where Orba and the others were stationed. Or rather than a visitor, it was an applicant wanting to join the mercenary platoon. Of course, his coming to see Orba was illogical. Orba worked with mercenaries from Taúlia, not soldiers from Helio. However, he wasn't able to flatly turn him away as it was Kay's younger brother, Niels.

Gilliam, who was at the garrison, started out by shouting at him.

"You're not fit to be a soldier with that leg. Go back and hide behind your sister."

About three months earlier, Niels had enlisted as a volunteer and had taken part in the battle at Eimen against Garda's army. There, he had been injured in his leg and he was still dragging it from the knee down when he walked.

But Niels stubbornly ignored him. He was carrying a bundle under his arm in which he had

probably gathered up his belongings and a brand-new sword hung from his waist.

“My sister has someone good for her now. This isn’t going to cause trouble for anyone anymore. I don’t want a life where I’m just going to grow old helping my sister in this town!” Orba, who had just left the place, headed back. As soon as he saw that mask, Niels started vigorously appealing to him, almost kneeling at his feet.

“What are you going to do Orba…… Captain?”

At Shique’s question, Orba drummed his fingers against the sword at his waist.

“Follow me,” he said to Niels and brought him to the garden. It was little more than a courtyard surrounded by a high wall.

“Will you hire me?” Niels followed behind him, looking somewhat agitated. He was about the same age as Orba, perhaps a year older. Orba drew his sword as soon as they reached the garden.

“Come at me. I’ll test you out.”

His eyes gleamed quietly behind the mask and the sunlight reflected on his sword was piercing. Niels gulped.

At about the same moment, his sister Kay rushed into the garrison. She was no less agitated than her brother,

“Please stop him! He won’t make it back a second time if he goes to fight! Why can’t he understand that he’ll just end up like father?”

“Now, now. Calm down,” Gilliam shrugged his broad shoulders. “Your little brother will be right back. Look.”

Gilliam pointed to the garden door just as Orba came through it. Niels was following hot on his heels. But he looked as though he was about to stumble as not only his leg but also his arms didn’t seem to be moving properly. “P-Please wait. That was, just one-sided,” he was gasping for breath.

“I told you, didn’t I? You get five tries to hit me. And if with that you can’t even graze me, then give up.”

“I wasn’t able to prepare. And you know, with this leg…”

“Who’s going to go easy on you on the battlefield because of your leg? Your enemies will aim for it and your allies will leave you behind as a dead weight. Either way, you’ll just end up as

a corpse."

"I-I'm… I'll…"

His arms still hanging loosely from where they had gone numb when Orba repelled his sword, he fell to his knees. Orba walked away without turning to look as Niels' tears dripped to the floor.

"Idiot. You idiot. You really are, you," Kay's voice was choked with tears as she hugged her little brother's shoulders from behind.

While these various events were taking place, Ax Bazgan, the de facto leader of the western alliance, wrapped up his affairs in Taúlia. From organising the troops and ensuring the soldiers' provisions to deciding what to do about defence and finance while he was away, there had been a mountain of things for him to do. And while he was thinking about them all, there was the risk that Garda would have pushed forward his western invasion before Ax had even taken a single step out of Taúlia.

Because Taúlia was situated at the eastern tip of Tauran, it didn't have the same incessant coming and going of people as Cherik or Helio did. Because of that, there was no need for the same constant vigilance, but at the same time, its coffers did not grow full like those of the two other countries. There was barely any trade with Mephius to the east and even that was confined to a merchant called Zaj Haman.

"We can't use up all our swords and bullets in this war." Ax spoke lightly but his words were not a joke. If they defeated Garda but failed to quickly secure the northern trade routes, Taúlia or perhaps even the west itself would be weakened and would risk starving.

Also among the many concerns that Ax had settled was a visit to Bouwen Tedos' sick room. Bouwen lay in bed in his room within the Fifth Army Corps' barracks. He was embarrassed that his lord had come to visit in person and ashamed that he himself had brazenly survived despite losing the troops he had been given. Ax said only,

"Shame gets you nowhere. Work harder than ever for the sake of those who were lost." Bouwen wept at his words. Afterwards, Ax had Bouwen moved to a large room within the castle and entrusted him to care of the doctors who tended exclusively to the royal family.

For his part, the strategist Ravan Dol had managed to regain consciousness and was likewise bedridden within his apartments in Taúlia while he recovered his health. He was suffering from broken ribs and was in pain from his waist and back, so right now, there was no way he could join the front.

Ravan had refused to let Ax visit him.

“If you have the time to come and look at this old man’s face, then use to it to do what you should be doing as lord of Taúlia.”

His words were admirable but Ax understood what the strategist was really feeling. In a word, humiliation. Although the relationship between the two of them was that of superior and subordinate, it was also like that of teacher and student, like that of father and son, and occasionally like that of stubborn mutual adversaries.

In the end, Ravan had gone so far as to declare that “If my lord comes to see me, I will kill myself by slitting my own throat.” On the other hand, he had written a letter with measures for fighting Garda and had had it sent to his lord.

That busy period passed and Ax was once more on horseback, about to leave for Helio. Toún and Raswan, the father and son in charge of Taúlia’s defence, were there to see him off.

“Toún, I leave things to you while I’m gone.”

“Brother, I look forward to hearing about your travels. Be sure to tell us about how the sorcerer begged for his life.”

Toún said easily but as they bowed to Ax, who sat atop his horse, no word was heard from his son Raswan. But he suddenly fixed his eyes on the war fan that hung at Ax’s waist. Perhaps noticing his gaze, Ax casually made as if to hide it with his mantle.

At that time, was there anyone to notice that Raswan’s lips curved into a sinister smile?

Garda’s invasion had begun about half a year earlier.

The western alliance’s counter-attack was about to start.

Chapter 3: The Sorcerer Garda

Part 1

Back when the Tauran region first started to see a chance to push back against Garda's army.

Led by Moldorf, Garda's forces retreated northwest to Kadyne after their defeat at Cherik. It was Moldorf's home country. Naturally that wasn't why they fled there. Since they could not prevent the enemy from going north, Moldorf judged that they should leave a battalion there to consolidate their defence. But as soon as he arrived in Kadyne, he received an order from one of the sorcerer's who was Garda's subordinates.

“Take two thousand soldiers to Eimen.”

Eimen was further north than Kadyne and could well be thought of as the last strategic rampart from which Zer Illias could be defended. They would leave a force of about a thousand in Kadyne. Hearing that, Moldorf looked puzzled.

What the... Eimen could hardly be called a suitable position from which to defend. Perhaps, Moldorf pondered, rather than send a large military force to defend Kadyne, which was encircled to the east and west by mountains, they had judged that the enemy might move its troops towards Eimen, which was considered easier to attack. But in any event, Garda's orders were absolute.

Sir Sorcerer probably has some plan in mind.

This was normal for Garda's army. Even though they won victory after victory, once the enemy's power had been suppressed, those in charge of the army should have been handing down orders. But instead, they left generals and soldiers alike without any guiding instructions.

All they said was “Wait for the signal for the next march,” and after conveying that message, they refused to see anybody. During that time, the soldiers, who were just a jumbled hodgepodge without any unity, grew wilder and rougher. With their families or lover taken hostage, there were also many whose impatience turned to despair.

This was the first time they had lost a battle. Of course, the soldiers obeyed the sorcerer for the aforementioned reasons, but that wasn't all. There was no denying that they had felt a certain awed dread towards the sorcerer whose true nature was unknown and who would seize victory no matter what force opposed him.

Even that sorcery has weakened.

The soldiers were increasingly losing morale. Rather than letting them run amok in his home city of Kadyne, it was certainly better to take most of them to Eimen.

Having convinced himself of that half out of a feeling of depression, Moldorf had his subordinates start making preparations again. He himself used what time they had left to go and see some familiar faces.

Like the fearless Kadyne warriors that they were, you wouldn't have thought from their bold manner that their city was being occupied, but still, their expressions, words and actions betrayed their rage. Among them was Moldorf's younger brother, Nilgif. He was a warrior who bore the epithet “the Blue Dragon of Kadyne” and Moldorf and he were known together as the “Twin Dragons of Kadyne”. He was born from a different mother than Moldorf and was more than ten years younger than him. But in looks and in the impression they gave off they were very similar.

“Brother ! You’ve returned?”

Nilgif called out in a voice like thunder, his feet stomping loudly. Although he was slightly shorter than his brother, he was broad. He looked like a wine barrel from which sprouted large hands and feet, and Moldorf’s mouth softened when he saw that dearly missed figure.

“Yeah, I lost, I lost. Total defeat.”

“Oh?” Nilgif’s thick eyebrows rose then drew downwards.

“What?”

“Ah, no. I was thinking that I expected you to look grimmer. You’ve worn a frown since the day Kadyne fell to Garda. But you seem to be in a good mood today.”

“How could I be in a good mood after being defeated? How many men were lost? I’m not that heartless.”

“I might have phrased that badly…. Rather than being in a good mood, I should have said that you’re full of energy. Right, there’s usually only one reason for you to be like that after losing a battle, Brother.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

Both of them had removed their armour to sit down and nearby attendants were holding out *kumis* [2] for them. The people of Kadyne had much of the nomad spirit in them and their way of life also resembled theirs. As they were near an area of lakes and marshes, the lands around them were fertile and easy to farm, but the wilderness to the south was deliberately used as pasture for large herds of livestock. It was also said that the craftworks passed down from generation to generation among the nomads had reached cultural maturity in Kadyne, so high was their quality.

“When you’ve met a worthy foe on the battlefield.”

“A worthy foe,” Moldorf repeated, “Well, you might be right.”

Since joining Garda's forces, Moldorf had won one victory after another. But not once had he felt excitement or joy from those battles. One or two of Garda's sorcerers would come to the troops and, acting in place of commanding officers, they would direct which way the army was to go. That was all.

Although even if you called them commanding officers, everything about Garda's army was strange. In any case, Moldorf didn't even know those men's names. They wore hoods that always half-concealed their faces and because of that, even their looks couldn't be clearly distinguished.

"Think that my voice is Garda's voice, that my eyes are Garda's eyes," the sorcerers never tired of saying. They were undoubtedly Garda's subordinates but they would always simply point to where the army was to march, without giving any concrete orders about tactics or how to deploy the soldiers.

It's strange.

What came after was left entirely to Moldorf and the various other generals. Those generals had originally come from separate, rival powers, and needless to say, it was rare for them to agree on anything during the war councils.

Yet they won.

Overwhelmingly.

How? – There was no need to wrack one's brain. No matter which country it was, just before Garda's army made its move, or sometimes just after, internal strife would unfailingly erupt. Before anyone knew it, one of the generals or perhaps a younger child from the royal family who had been excluded from the succession race would side with Garda's forces and fan the flames of rebellion from within. Thereupon, Garda's army would attack with the force of a gale. It was enough for Moldorf and the others to race forward on their war horses or their dragons, and to bellow out their war cries as they charged.

There was no need for strategy.

That kind of fight won't get a warrior's blood boiling.

Moldorf's helmet was in the shape of a dragon. While drinking from a wineskin that was the same shape as the horn on that helmet, the great general of more than fifty years of age pondered.

"There was certainly a man who was somewhat interesting."

"In what way?"

Nilgif leaned forward. Maybe it was because he was some fifteen years apart in age from his brother, but it was an oddly youthful gesture that didn't fit his splendid beard or his many feats of arms. Even now, his eyes brightened like those of a child listening to an old legend told by their parents.

"A swordsman who wears a mask. He seems to still be a boy, but he is capable. He also seems to have a good brain and everywhere I went, he got in my way."

"Ho."

While telling his younger brother about what had happened on the battlefield, Moldorf couldn't help remembering what that masked swordsman had said.

Show true loyalty, Moldorf. Prove to your princess that Kadyne will not bow to the likes of Garda.

Everywhere that Garda's army moved to, internal strife and betrayal would unfailingly arise. Kadyne had been no exception.

However, it hadn't been because of a general or a soldier who was dissatisfied with the treatment they received or with their king.

Princess Lima Khadein.

The king of Kadyne's only daughter had been tormented nightly by a certain evil dream. At the time, it was something that was happening throughout the Tauran region. Garda would appear in the dream and with strange arts handed down since ancient times, he would seduce young maidens and lure them to him.

Lima had consulted her father and the priests of the Dragon Gods faith about it, but it was before Garda had emerged as a genuine threat and those around her had laughed it off as nothing but an ordinary dream.

Then at about that same time, a group of pilgrims had arrived in Kadyne. They had claimed to be in the middle of going around the cities of the western region to offer prayers at each temple. But they were soldiers sent by Garda.

That night, Lima Khadein had suddenly risen from her bed and, without anyone noticing, she had opened the gate and let them into the castle.

Guided by Lima to her father's – in other words, the king's – bedchamber, they had silently assassinated the king of Kadyne. Having donned weapons and armour inside the castle, the soldiers performed a surprise attack on the guards at Kadyne's North and South gates, which they then opened to let in the allied troops that had been lying in wait outside.

Meanwhile, Kadyne's army had been almost entirely unable to react. Both Moldorf and Nilgif were captured without being able to display even a tenth of the military prowess that had made them famous throughout the west.

Before long, Kadyne had been completely occupied. Some of its people had been taken to Zer Illias, while the remainder were made hostages to control the soldiers. Princess Lima was one of those taken away.

From then on, Moldorf and the others were Garda's underlings.

If I were to cut down the sorcerers – he had thought that over and over again. If he could recruit volunteers to kill the sorcerers then immediately turn their horses towards the temple ruins at Zer Illias where Garda was and attack, then maybe they could put an end to these ridiculous battles.

However, since the sorcerers always seemed to seclude themselves alone somewhere when they weren't at war, how was it that they were surprisingly well-informed about the situation within the army and the occupied territories? Moldorf guessed that if those sorcerers were "Garda's eyes" then there might also be spies within the army who acted as "the sorcerers' eyes".

In which case, until he knew how many spies there were and who they were, he wouldn't be able to make a move. There was no telling what harm might befall the people in Kadyne and Zer Illias either. Moldorf was praised to the skies as a general among generals, but he was not so callous as to believe that anything was justified as long as the enemy was dealt with.

"How's the situation in Kadyne?" Moldorf asked his brother once he finished telling him about the battlefield.

"Not much has changed. Although those sorcerers have recently started remodelling the temple of the Dragon Gods faith."

"Remodelling it? It doesn't look any different."

"Yeah. I thought they might be planning to make a show of Garda's power by tarting up the temple, but it seems they're just adding stuff to the inside. Everyone except them is forbidden from going in or out and nobody knows what the hell they're up to."

"Hmm."

"By the way, Brother, were you able to see your family?" Nilgif asked as he poured wine into his brother's cup.

"No," Moldorf shook his thick neck either side, "I haven't seen them."

“Why not? Even though they are hostages, if you ask to see them, Brother, even those guys wouldn’t say no.”

“It’s no good if I’m the only who gets to meet them,” Moldorf said decisively. From the generals to the regular soldiers, almost every man in Kadyne had had their family taken hostage. His brother Nilgif’s family had also been taken to Zer Illias. Considering the situation, Moldorf couldn’t ask that he alone be allowed to see his family.

“Brother,” Nilgif now lowered his voice.

“What?”

“Brother, you currently lead seven hundred of Kadyne’s soldiers. In the same way, I’m in charge of five hundred of our soldiers here. Three of the five sorcerers who were in Kadyne have left and it seems there’s some kind of commotion. Not even Garda could have expected the defeat at Cherik. Brother, maybe now…”

“Don’t, Nilgif.”

“Why not? Taúlia, Cherik or Helio’s troops will be here soon. If we rebel as they advance, we would have the impetus to take back Kadyne, join with the West’s allied forces and attack Zer Illias.”

Nilgif’s eyes were glittering as they only did when on the battlefield. As Moldorf’s younger brother, he naturally held a soul as fierce as anyone’s. Although he could almost feel himself being drawn in, Moldorf firmly shook his head.

“The people would become victims. Don’t forget that Princess Lima and your family are at Zer Illias.”

“Speed, Brother. We won’t give the enemy the chance to use the people or the princess as a shield. If we attack the enemy capital quickly enough, they’ll likely just abandon everyone to their fate. No one would be fool enough to drag hostages along with them when the spears are almost at their throats.”

“That’s…”

What his brother was saying was true. Moldorf wrinkled his brow. The enemy was a sorcerer. The man who claimed to be Garda was unfathomable. He had caused innumerable situations that utterly went against common sense and controlled nearly half of the western lands.

“And also, whatever you say about Princess Lima,” unusually for Nilgif, he openly displayed his anger in front of his brother and shouted, “isn’t she just a whore who succumbed to Garda

and betrayed her country?”

“Enough!”

“Why? *That* is no longer the princess we knew. The real Princess Lima Khadein would never have been deceived by sorcery!”

“We are being toyed with by that sorcery and forced to fight against our will. Think on that before you malign the princess further! ”

“Brother!”

As violent sparks flew from the two’s eyes, a man dressed in long robes noiselessly appeared. It was one of the sorcerers staying in Kadyne whose head seemed to be bald above his lean face. Before the startled pair could turn around to look at the doorway, the sorcerer spoke.

“Have the Twin Dragons of Kadyne gotten into a drunken brawl between brothers? While that isn’t something I mind, it would be problematic if you forget that we are still in the middle of a war. And also,” his voice seemed to slither out, “don’t bother with pointless ideas. Our eyes and our ears are everywhere in the western lands.”

From the way he spoke, he seemed to have heard the brothers’ conversation from the beginning. As was to be expected, Nilgif’s expression changed but, in part because he had been drinking, he gave a forced laugh and fired a shot in retaliation against this sorcerer whom he hated beyond hatred.

“But for all that, it seems you weren’t able to tell that Helio’s army would attack my brother’s troops. Not even a sorcerer’s eyes are infallible,” he said with heavy irony.

The sorcerer’s thin lips curved into an unpleasant smile. “That can be true on occasion. But even so, our eyes are not something you should make light of. Oh! Sir Nilgif, your child is a daughter of seven? They say that daughters who resemble their fathers are beautiful, but in your esteemed case, it is fortunate that she takes after her mother.”

“Bastard, what are you…”

“As was promised, your family is currently being treated well in Zer Illias. But a single word from me from here and that treatment might well change. We could have them go from receiving two meals a day to only one every two days, or no, every three days. Or we could have either the mother or the daughter be sacrificed to the Dragon Gods. Oh my, the young lady appears to have suddenly burst into tears. Perhaps she sensed my presence. Your wife is cradling her and singing close to her ear. That isn’t a lullaby from Kadyne, is it? I believe it is a song from the Fugrum region.”

“Bastard…”

This time, the colour drained from Nilgif’s face and his expression stiffened. His wife and child had certainly been taken to Zer Illias. And certainly, whenever his daughter would cry, his wife would hold her close from behind and sing to her. Furthermore, it was true that his wife was not from Kadyne. These were not things this sorcerer should have known. Not without seeing them with his own eyes, hearing them with his own ears.

The sorcerer’s expression did not turn triumphant. Before turning to leave, he simply added, almost as an afterthought,

“Hasten your preparations, Sir Moldorf. The enemy will divide their forces between Eimen and Kadyne. Kadyne’s defence will be left to you, Sir Nilgif and Eimen’s to you, Sir Moldorf. With the Twin Dragons of Kadyne protecting the rightful ruler of Tauran, the soldier’s morale will surely rise.”

Nilgif’s fists were shaking. Whether it was from rage or from fear, Moldorf pretended not to notice.

“I beg you, don’t get carried away by your temper while I’m gone,” he insisted firmly.

Seven days later – at the time Orba was heading towards Taúlia – Moldorf was back on his horse and left from Kadyne with two thousand soldiers, heading up north. North, where the wide steppes that had been used as pastures in the days of Zer Tauran stretched out. There, as though guarding the entrance to them, was Eimen.

The wind was fierce.

It was the season when the sand-laden wind blowing from the west grew stronger and stronger. Kadyne was protected from it by the western mountain range, but tiny particles of sand clung to the soldier’s faces as they marched northwards to a position overlooking Eimen in the east. Wearing his helmet low over his eyes, Moldorf urged his horse forward and kept his face devoid of emotion.

This is an ominous wind, he couldn’t help thinking.

Legend had it that the western desert was where the Dragon God clan had been defeated, and each grain of sand within it came from where their fossilised remains had crumbled away.

The wind blew throughout the region’s meadows.

At a point located almost exactly at the centre of the steppes was Zer Illias.

A city of ruins.

The wind scattered the piles of sand that no one trod on, then brought more sand that once more piled up within the cracks in the paving stones.

At the top of the wide staircase, at what had originally been the highest place within the ruins, was the only building that had recently been renovated by human hands – a temple to the Dragon Gods.

The sand had also been swept away and the gateposts at the entrance soared proudly upwards. Amidst a landscape where all was death and ruin, it displayed an eerie vitality.

And from within, a voice called out,

“Lord Garda!”

Part 2

“Lord Garda!”

“Yes,” after being called out to once again, an old man turned around.

It was the innermost part of the temple. The impressively high ceiling that led there from the entrance suddenly sloped down and a large altar resembling a bed fit for a giant had been placed there. Further in still, statues of the Dragon Gods stood on pedestals.

“I was called by a different name for more than sixty years. It will take some time before it really sinks in.”

The old man was dressed in plain grey robes and at his waist hung a dagger sheathed in scabbard woven in golden thread. Apart from some bracelets at both wrists, he wore no ornaments save one: a small jewel that shone dully at his forehead. However, it was neither held there by a thread nor incrusted into a circlet. It appeared to be buried directly into the deep wrinkles in the old man’s brow.

Garda.

A name handed down with awe and dread for more than two hundred years. And now, that name was being spread throughout the west with a fear and hatred far rawer than when it was transmitted as part of history.

There he undoubtedly was, in that dimly-lit temple. As for the person himself, he was a short, elderly man of around sixty. He could not really be said to fit the image of a peerless sorcerer who had revived in this world after two centuries. His expression was colourless and gloomy, his hair was thinning and a somewhat straggly beard hung from his lower lip and chin.

This was the sorcerer Garda, the man who had drenched the paving stones of innumerable city-states in blood and who had decorated the gateposts of the royal courts with the severed heads of their sovereigns.

“Zafar, Tahī. What is it? I left the war to you as I will be readying the magic until dawn.”

“Our deepest apologies,” the man called “Zafar” bowed his grey head. His age was not much different from Garda’s. He was tall and broad-chested. With his fine head of hair and equally splendid beard, he looked far more ‘Garda-like’ than Garda did.

In complete contrast, “Tahī”, who stood next to him, was a young woman. She appeared to be in her early twenties and with her dark-brown skin, supple body and black-rimmed eyes brimming with seductive radiance, she was so beautiful that if she but dressed in jewels and finery, there was surely no king whose favour she would not receive. Tahī parted open her moist lips,

“We were anxious to report to you as there has been an intruder.”

“An intruder? A spy from Taúlia?”

“No. A sorcerer. He was likely sent by Ende. We found him as he was about to break through the magic barrier. We reduced him to ash: not one bone, not one piece of flesh remains.” Perhaps because she was still savouring the aftertaste of slaughter, Tahī’s expression was bewitching. Her eyes were glittering with excitement and she almost seemed to be panting. “Even the sorcerers of Ende, said to be descended from the Magic Dynasty, have degenerated. Lord Garda, you were right to leave that place. Those sorcerers who are bound by obsolete customs and laws are no better than the ordinary people who understand nothing about ether. They can’t even comprehend the words of the Dragon Gods handed down from long ago or even one fraction of the laws governing this world…”

“No, that doesn’t seem to be true,” Garda’s voice was amused.

Before Tahī could grasp his meaning, he flung out his right hand as though he were tossing something away. Immediately, sparks suddenly flew right behind where Zafar and Tahī were standing. The two sorcerers whirled around and there before their eyes, illuminated by the fire, was the figure of a person.

“You!”

Tahī’s beautiful face was suddenly twisted in hatred. Zafar instantly put himself on guard. Encircled by the ring of flames that Garda had called forth was a man in trailing black robes with a hood pulled low over his head. “Ridiculous! I burnt you to nothing with my own hands!”

“Indeed,” spoke the man in black, “but that was only a ‘shadow’ that I had created. If you can’t even see through that much, then you sorcerers who call yourselves Garda’s subordinates will soon lose the power that allowed you to sweep through the western lands.”

“What!?” Zafar raised both his hands. The flow of ether, invisible to ordinary people, was stirred as he moved, but,

“It’s fine,” Garda stopped him. As though brushing aside both Zafar and Tahī, he approached the man in black. His orders were absolute and the sorcerers, wiping the hatred from their faces, fell back on either side of Garda and kneeled.

Garda snapped his bony fingers. The flames surrounding the man in black promptly disappeared.

“It’s been a while, Hezel. So Ende’s Bureau of Sorcery chose you for its assassin.”

“It has nothing to do with assassination. This is of my own volition. I wanted to confirm a former comrade’s triumph with my own eyes.”

“Your tongue is as glib as ever, you damn cub. Well, it’s fine. Zafar, Tahī, leave. This person is my guest.”

“Yes.”

“But…”

Unlike Zafar who commendably bowed his head, the embers of killing intent still smouldered in Tahī’s eyes. But when Garda sent her a glance, she immediately bowed, then with a supple tread left the temple with Zafar.

“Be careful when you go home,” Garda’s voice still sounded amused. “You might get attacked from behind. You probably won’t get away with as light a wound as this time.”

“As expected, you saw through me,” Hezel said dispassionately as he pulled back his hood. Surprisingly enough, he was a youth with well-ordered features. However, a large part of his right cheek was hideously burned. And the wound appeared to have been made mere moments ago. Yet even though it should still have been giving off the stench of burnt flesh, Hezel didn’t seem to feel any pain. “Despite what I said just now, that was fitting of the clan that long protected Garda’s tomb.”

“Information travels fast. Certainly, starting with Zafar, the sorcerers claim to be the descendants of vassals who served Garda directly. But only Tahī, the woman who injured your face, seems to have a different way of manipulating ether. It would make for a fascinating subject of research – well, anyway. I don’t have time to take on anything else at the moment. And anyhow, the research I dedicated my life to is about to bear fruit on a scale that cannot compare to anything that I did before. This is something I could never have talked of in Ende.”

“Research performed by Master Reizus… so in other words, taboo magic.”

“What taboo,” Garda gave a low chuckle. It was strange to the point of being awe-inspiring how in the old man’s perfectly nondescript face, his smile was filled with malice. “It’s as Tahī says. Those bound by outdated conventions cannot use ether to solve the mysteries of this world. Ethics and morals are no more than an iron cage. If you don’t step out from it, you lot will forever be small people living in a narrow world.”

Originally, this man was called Reizus and did not claim to be Garda. Originally, he was not even Zerdian but was a sorcerer from Ende's Bureau of Sorcery…

Sorcery – although it was referred to by that simple word, there were not that many people in this world who understood what it truly was.

The one who had laid the foundations of this planet's sorcery was the father of the Magic Dynasty, Zodias. Zodias had investigated the various ruins scattered across the planet that had been left by the Dragon Gods and, using the artefacts excavated from them, had discovered how to manipulate natural phenomenon.

Ether was indispensable for doing so. This planet's seawater comprised a certain substance which changed property when it was vaporised and transformed into the energy supply that powered the artefacts. That gas was called ether but all seawater did not contain it and the ether content varied depending on the location. Moreover, the had been many reports in recent years that ether was drying up.

Magic had once allowed humanity to drive away the Ryuujin tribe, known as their natural enemy, and to build in these lands an empire so splendid that they had believed it would last a thousand years. Magic too was now declining.

"Small people rely on steel to repeatedly wage war. It's utterly antiquated and pitiable. Even after leaving the home planet, humans have not torn free of their own husks. I am convinced that sorcery is the path to evolution. Look at the Magic Dynasty. Look at how much peace and prosperity it brought. In order to bring back that era, we cannot let magic decline. It is ridiculous that research aimed at that should be taboo."

Reizus had truly dreamed of reviving the Magic Dynasty. And all the more so when he realised that the time he had left was dwindling. His zeal grew day by day until finally he stole into the royal treasury where were stored the artefacts inherited from the era of the Magic Dynasty – also called "vessels of sorcery" – that Ende's royal family had protected from generation to generation, and wilfully carried out as many forbidden books to read as he could.

From amidst this vast store of ancient knowledge, Reizus finally found a topic that had been taboo even under the Magic Dynasty. The technique for obtaining ether from something other than seawater. When he saw what was described, his heart nearly stopped from the shock. Although it wasn't as efficient as high-content seawater, it was in a sense an inexhaustible resource.

It was none other than "humans"

According to the ancient documents, ether was by nature one component of the energy needed for humans to live, and it was confirmed that everyone emitted a small amount of ether at their

time of death. Furthermore, in combination with a special vessel of sorcery, it was also possible to collect tiny amounts from living humans. The first to realise that possibility had not been the sorcerers but the Ryuujin tribe, humanity's natural enemy who had stood in its way when it had first alighted on this planet. Legend even had it that they kept captured humans caged for that reason, as livestock to supply ether.

This is it. In order to revive sorcery, there is no other way but to carry this out, Reizus had decided. However, not even the banned books were sufficiently detailed that reading them allowed him to grasp the method in full. There was no choice but to identify it by his own means. To that end, a huge research facility and a great many humans for experimentation were necessary.

Although Ende's Bureau of Sorcery certainly had extensive facilities compared to other countries, they weren't enough to fulfil Reizus' ambitious desire. Even so, he was unable to abandon it and so decided to use the Bureau's largest research facility without authorization.

In terms of test subjects, one only had to take a single step outside and there were mountain-loads of them. After all, if they lived from here on, they would only be a bunch of people who would run through the planet's resources. Regardless of whether they were old or young, men or women, Reizus secretly kidnapped the people of Ende. And every time he tested the effects of the artefacts he had to hand, it ended in failure. No fewer than a hundred irreplaceable lives were sacrificed for his experiments.

A year after he had begun his research, the Bureau of Sorcery finally uncovered Reizus' actions. When the nature of his crimes was exposed – and these naturally threatened the continued existence of the Bureau of Sorcery itself – he was banished from the Grand Duchy of Ende.

Yet by some strange twist of fate, almost immediately afterwards he obtained everything he desired. The free use of numerous artefacts, the great sorcerer Garda's research data and, above all, an abundance of test subjects, or in other words, a great many sacrifices.

It had been about half a year since Reizus had taken Garda's name. As city after city fell, a multitude of people were given up as test subjects. Indeed, they had not been sacrificed to the Dragon Gods. Their bodies, hearts and souls had been consecrated to Reizus' experiments.

"Hezel, you must have felt it too. More than anywhere in the world, more than Ende, more than Allion, it is in these western lands of Tauran that the greatest mass of ether now swirls."

"Indeed. You should certainly be able to obtain results," Hezel spoke dispassionately, looking unimpressed. "However, of all the information that I have been collecting about 'Garda', there is one point that I don't understand. Why have you gathered women in high social positions from all over the west?"

As though that question were an extremely amusing joke, Reizus – no, it was undoubtedly the sorcerer who called himself Garda – laughed.

“The evil sorcerers of fairy-tales usually carry off princesses and imprison them in high towers.”

“Indeed.”

“You are boring. There’s never been any point talking to you.”

“Well, is that so?”

“Putting jokes aside, my research has shown that the ether produced by those in high social positions is of equally high quality.”

“So that’s it,” Hezel shook his head, probably taking it for a joke. “Social ranks are no more than something established by humans. Furthermore, these are turbulent times. A man who was just a slave until yesterday might become king at the same time that a woman who had until then lived the life of an elegant noble might lose her homeland and fall into slavery.”

“The heart affects the soul,” the edges of Garda’s mouth curled upwards into a grin, “A heart that aspires to be noble, a heart that is revered as noble by others, these are not without worth. The heart affects the soul and the soul affects ether. You could say that just as the qualities one is born with differ between each person, so does ether differ depending on the person and the circumstances they were raised in.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll show you something good.”

Garda raised his hand and snapped his fingers once again, and a sound came from where the statues of the Dragon Gods were. Quietly and unobtrusively, a woman had appeared. Between the altar and the pedestal was a staircase leading underground and she appeared to have climbed up from there. The young woman was clothed in a thin robe.

“The princess of Kadyne. Has it been about four months? That’s old for ether-producing livestock.”

Lima Khadein. The eighteen-year-old princess had lost the noble appearance that had once been compared to flowers and to butterflies and, bowing like a slave, folded her legs beneath her and kneeled where she was. Garda drew near her and caressed her cheek with his finger.

“Princess, who am I?”

“Lord Garda. The ruler of this world and my ruler also.”

“Will you follow my orders?”

“Whatever they may be.”

Her expression was vacant, as though she were wandering in a dream although awake. Garda turned towards Hezel for a moment,

“This woman ushered my soldiers into her own country’s castle, causing the fall of her homeland. Do you understand what that means?”

“You used sorcery to brainwash her?”

“Yes. But it’s not easy to manipulate a person’s heart completely. A human’s natural instincts and preferences, or things like morals are surprisingly firm and if you give an order than runs counter to them, temporary hypnosis will have no effect. Right, for example,” Garda turned back towards Lima and once more stroked her soft cheek with his bony finger. “You said that you would follow my orders whatever they may be?”

“Yes Lord Garda. I am at your orders.”

“I will give you an order.”

“Yes.”

“Die.”

“Yes.”

Garda drew the dagger from the scabbard that was thrust into his girdle and threw it at Lima. She picked it up with both hands and pointed the tip of the blade to her throat. Her bearing had been almost too smooth but now, her movements suddenly stopped. The dagger was reflected within her large, beautiful dark eyes. Her shoulders trembled and her hands shook.

“What’s wrong. That is my order. Die.”

“Yes,” she answered but although it certainly seemed that she would carry it out, just as the blade was about to reach her throat, her movements stopped. Lima’s trembling became uncontrollable and teardrops were overflowing from her large-pupiled eyes.

“How painful for this woman,” Garda once more turned towards Hezel. He was smiling. It was a smile exactly like that of a child showing of the playground they had claimed for themselves. “Although her consciousness would obey my order, her instinct refuses to do so. That she cannot follow my order is inevitably painful for her. Do you understand, Hezel? However much one may control the outer layer of consciousness, one cannot destroy a human’s core through half-baked methods.”

“Right.”

“And thus, the magic used on the kidnapped women takes time and has to be repeated. For them to dedicate themselves entirely to me from the bottom of their heart – or better put, from their very soul – I would need to tune their mind into becoming as one with me. If I could do so, I wonder if I could obtain even higher quality ether. But that’s back-breaking work. On top of being a task that I couldn’t entrust to anyone else, I would have to dredge up each of those women’s memories one by one, probe their personality, figure out where and how to manipulate them to do my will, what to alter so that they abandon their hearts to me and I would have to do all of that groping in the dark. When I took the name of Garda and obtained free use of so many sacrifices, I certainly didn’t expect to have to take the trouble of doing something like understanding women’s feelings.”

“Master Reizus.”

“What?”

“If you don’t release her, this woman will be destroyed from within.”

Although he spoke indifferently, looking at it, Lima Khadein still had the dagger in her hands and was even now in the midst of her struggle. Her entire body was shaking, her eyes were open wide and drool was dribbling from her lips. With a single muttered “Oh,” Garda held his hand out before her eyes. At that, the princess of Kadyne closed her eyes as though asleep, her knees gave way where she was and she almost fell forward.

“I took great pains to procure the livestock. Losing even one of them like this would be

regrettable. Although…" Garda raised a finger with a gesture that swept through the air and Princess Lima rose unsteadily to her feet then, without making a sound, in the same way that she had appeared, she disappeared from sight between the altar and the pedestal. "As it is, I still haven't obtained the perfect ether. With Tauran's city-states, if a ruler's lineage lasts three generations, it is talked about as having history. The blood is thin. It can't refine the soul. When all's said and done, what I want is the blood of the Bazgan house which once founded Zer Tauran here. But even if I get it in my grasp soon, my body is not that of a god. There is such a thing as time being limited."

"However, Master Rei… No, Master Garda. Naturally you will be aware that the other states of Tauran are currently gathering as one. No matter how much ether you have in store here, if you do not make a move quickly, there is a chance you will have very little time left indeed. Why do you let your enemies do as they please? If Garda cowers in fear after only one defeat, won't all those other nations be whipped into a frenzy?"

"Do you still not understand, Hezel? The supplies of ether that I have stored and refined here are no more than a "hand" against them."

"And, what will you do?"

"This temple itself is the same as an artefact that Garda – I mean the Garda of two hundred years ago – constructed. The restorations that have just been completed weren't given priority simply to flaunt Garda's stronghold. Garda built structures similar to this temple all over the place and selected sorcerers with a wavelength that matched his own, then he was going to use the temples and those people to create an ether "path"."

"A path?"

"That's right. Once the "path" was complete, without stirring from their far-flung locations, the sorcerers could dispatch ether and achieve communication. That's no less than saying that in the secret arts he pursued, Garda's control over sorcery was even more advanced than that of the Magic Dynasty. Information and magical power could fly about instantaneously throughout this huge continent. His control achieved greater perfection than anyone."

Hezel didn't give any reply but he stiffened unintentionally. He too could feel it. A soundless wave, a formless pulsation. With the temple as centre, Garda was like a giant who had extended his limbs over all of Tauran. A giant who had sucked the lifeblood of a multitude of people and who even now continued to expand.

"Communication is still possible but in order to send ether, artefacts along the same lines as this temple need to be built all around. First is Kadyne. The facilities there are complete. If I can send the ether that is stored here in Zer Ilias to Kadyne without stirring from here, then I should be able to win without losing a single soldier," Garda grinned broadly. "That's right, from the start I expected to draw in troops once the west started gathering. I grew tired of

capturing cities one after another. It's easier to take them when they're all bundled together. From now on, wherever the enemy breaks into will be within my sphere of influence."

"……"

"Controlling Tauran isn't much. Granted that I were to obliterate humanity within the entire region, I would still be far from my ideal ether. You should return to Ende and give whatever report you like. That the foolish old sorcerer Reizus that you all drove out no longer exists, that in his place there is a man with absurd and terrifying ambitions who would seize hold of the world."

The man once called Reizus laughed, his face like that of another person.

Part 3

While voices were being raised in various countries, Ax, Lasvius and Yamka II assembled once more at Cherik castle more than half a month after the troops led by Moldorf had been repelled.

During that time, Taúlia, Helio and Cherik had cooperated to spread out a strict military cordon, while Garda in contrast persisted in not moving a single soldier. He must of course have understood that they were setting up a common front, so if, for example, a small state that was about to join Taúlia's side were to be bullied by having a few neighbouring villages set alight, or if there were to be a raid aimed at the goods that were constantly travelling along the highways, or if a camp were to be set up in the Coldrin region in order to prevent the enemy from heading north as much as possible – those were things that seemed likely from Garda as he had been up until now. Yet his military force was only moved around Lakekish, Fugrum, Eimen and Kadyne, or in other words, within the occupied territories and things were so quiet it was eerie.

Although Ax and the others were unable to read his intentions, they were at any rate able to steadily amass their military strength without encountering too many obstacles. The total number of soldiers they currently had gathered was a little under ten thousand. Naturally not all of them would be used for the offence but it had already been decided that if necessary they would send up to seventy percent of them to the front lines. Nevertheless, compared to the manpower, their horses, dragons and ammunition were somewhat lacking. Whether or not to take the time to gather sufficient amounts of these was something that Ax, who did not want to delay the departure to the front, and Yamka, an advocate of caution, got into frequent arguments about. Yet every time, Yamka would reluctantly back down at the words,

"Have faith in the Bazgan family's authority."

He was of course in a position of weakness.

Ax's retainers and the leading figures of Helio were running all over the west giving instructions to the troops that were leaving from the various cities, allocating weapons and supplies, and organising the military units. Moreover, on Ravan Dol's advice, Ax had set up an advance air carrier base north of Lake Soma, across from Cherik, on the old trade route to Eimen.

The ships they planned to send to the base were two cruisers belonging to Taúlia, seven small carriers gathered from the different cities and, at best, fifty short-range airships. In the west, where buying ether took time, using air carriers in battle was not the norm. For a large fleet it was quite a sparse line-up, but having it or not having it made all the difference in the world.

According to information, Garda's forces had air carriers. The ships would be used to guard against attacks from the flank or the rear during their march, and of course, they would be a powerful aid once the assault was launched on Zer Illias.

One of the two owned by Taúlia had only just been purchased from a Mephian merchant. It was faster than the other ships at the advance base and had a longer range. As was to be expected, the one who had provided it was Zaj Haman, the merchant who had the monopoly over shipping air carriers in Mephius.

"There are strongholds blocking the way to Zer Illias," Lasvius pointed with the pommel of his sword at the map spread out on the desk. There were two city-states northwest of Lake Soma. "First is Eimen. The shield of Zer Illias. The enemy should have positioned most of its military strength there as well."

Hearing the name 'Eimen', Ax's expression clouded over. It was a city standing at the boundary between the wilderness and what had been pastures in the era of Zer Illias, and it was also the land where, in the past, Ax's older sister had been sent in marriage. Ax himself had never been there but they had long had diplomatic relations with Taúlia. Yet now, he didn't know if his sister was safe or not.

"It is protected to the south by mountains but the other three sides are fairly open. It will be hard ground for the enemy to defend. There is however a possibility that they will build impromptu forts to prepare against our invasion."

Lasvius then tapped a location southwest of Eimen with his sword's pommel.

"The other is Kadyne. Its military capability cannot be overlooked. It looks like the enemy has emptied Fugrum and Lakekish and gathered their soldiers at these two locations."

Kadyne lay southwest across the mountains that protected Eimen. It was a city known for its belt of lakes and marshes and for its forest of low trees.

"Hmm," Ax nodded.

Up until now, Garda's army had concentrated the forces they had absorbed on a single point and had delivered their attack by surprise or by night. There had also been internal strife in each of states he had targeted, and while it had worked well for him, it seemed that once you removed that ability, Garda was left not knowing what to do next.

As Ax once more looked over the entire map on which information received from the scouts was jotted down here and there, he smiled.

"After only a single defeat, has Garda moved into nothing but a defensive stance? So he's ignorant of battles after all. We have the greater number of soldiers. We can win this war."

He wasn't normally a cheerful-looking man and for that reason, the smile he gave to those who had become his allies was all the warmer.

Eimen and Kadyne.

Seeing that whichever one they targeted the other would move in for a pincer attack, the allied forces would march in both directions and would carry out operations on both fronts. Of course, the enemy anticipated that and had divided their soldiers in half, intending to hold the decisive battle in Eimen.

As Ax and Lasvius had previously discussed, the enemy excelled at information warfare. It was unavoidable that enemy spies would be lurking. Nobody knew where their eyes and ears were. It was best to assume that the entire contents of their council of war would be leaked.

"That being the case, we'd never even get started on working out some kind of plan," Ax's way of thinking was simple. He simply decided to perform a two-prong attack. "Being greedy and trying to take both of them will only result in a bad outcome. It would be great if the troops sent to Kadyne act as a defence against the enemy. Sir Lasvius, what will you do?"

"I will go with you to Eimen, Lord Ax."

The commander of Helio's dragoons wasn't the sort to go in for complicated plans either. He thumped his chest once and spoke plainly. In this short period of time, Ax had come to like this man. He nodded contentedly.

"It's decided then. We, the main force, will head to Eimen and we will send a thousand soldiers to Kadyne, consisting mainly of infantrymen and mercenaries. Lord Yamka, I leave the defence of Cherik to you."

"Un-Understood."

Yamka II, who had been left out from start to finish, looked like he had just woken up. It had been the same when he had been linked with Garda and he was the kind of man who left everything to others and who thought it was fine to just wait for what would happen afterwards. Perhaps as far as Yamka was concerned, the situation with Garda was already as good as over. Ax laughed inwardly.

Good. As Ravan always says, I should act the part of a serene and uncomplicated king.

According to the old tactician, it had a bad influence on the officers, soldiers and retainers when Ax looked grim and sank into silence. "You should act serenely," Ravan always said. "Sufficiently so that the rumour will spread that you no fool. You will then be loved, my lord, and the retainers will feel that they must stretch every sinew to firmly support you."

There's a limit to how much of a fool you can be. There's no mistake that this Yamka is a fool, but because of that, his retainers do not stand firm.

The problem was that Garda seemed able to read the minds of all people, no matter how clever or wise they might be.

Hence the brute force approach. It's not wrong, but…

As bold as he was, even Ax couldn't shake off his unease whenever he considered whether they had any chance of success in this fight.

Three days after the tripartite talks, Orba, stationed in Helio, received his orders.

"This is the worst."

What made Talcott scowl wasn't that they had been chosen as part of the force to capture Kadyne but that the one who would be leading the thousand soldiers headed towards Kadyne was the commander of Helio's infantry battalion, Surūr Wyerim.

Another two days later, summons came from Surūr. Because the call extended to platoon leaders, Orba would also need to go.

The story of Taúlia's masked mercenary had become something of a rumour in Helio. He was person who had rendered distinguished service by rescuing the city along with Lasvius. And of course, it was also known that he was Mephian.

"Thank you for coming all the way from Taúlia. Or, no, it was from Mephius, wasn't it? That's an even greater distance. As expected of a gladiator, your ability to sniff out blood and battles is impressive," Surūr said sarcastically as soon as he spotted Orba's mask.

He had a round face but his narrow eyes were unpleasant. His moustache had been beautifully styled with what was clearly fussy attention.

Half of the Kadyne capture force was made up of Helio's regular soldiers and centred around Surūr but the rest was a collection of people of various origins. Helio's mercenary unit, the horseback archery unit of mountain tribesmen, infantrymen from states so tiny their names weren't even recorded on maps, a dragoon unit of nomads. And the fifty-three-strong mercenary platoon led by Orba.

When everyone was gathered, Surūr read out the organisation chart that he appeared to have personally put together.

Orba brought it back to his own unit.

“This is the worst,” Talcott looked up at the sky again.

Orba’s platoon wasn’t attached to any company and had been placed under the battalion commander Surūr’s direct supervision.

“Since you guys are Mephians, he’s going to torment you in full. No really, we’ll probably get given the most dangerous duties. Stan, you made the wrong choice. Can you never, neeever get things right?”

“Brother, I didn’t say anything.”

Orba didn’t particularly pay attention and lowered his gaze to the maps he had been collecting this past half month. He wasn’t displeased. However, he had inwardly decided that whoever he served under, he would assess the situation from their own surroundings and he himself would make sure to ascertain what it was he needed to do.

I’m not going through a repeat of Coldrin.

At that time, he had been pretty apathetic about the war. Saying that he had been apathetic while taking up his sword and heading out to risk his life on the battlefield was pretty strange, but thinking back to how he had been that time at the Coldrins, there was no other way to put it.

The defeat at the Coldrin Hills had been carved deeply into Orba’s heart. It wasn’t that he believed that he could have done something with his strength alone, but even so, if he had been a little more careful, and if he had had a little more influence on those around him, then he thought that they wouldn’t have been so comprehensively defeated.

Orba’s eyes landed on one point of the maps. Kadyne.

Apparently that Moldorf’s younger brother, Nilgif, was stationed in charge of defence there. Most of the troops were probably from Kadyne. It wouldn’t be the same kind of hodgepodge that Moldorf had been leading and, in the first place, Nilgif and the others wouldn’t be fighting as part of Garda’s army but in order to defend their own home. They would be coordinated and their morale would be high.

Considering the number of soldiers, Ax seems to be thinking that we’re to keep Kadyne in check. Which meant that they didn’t have to capture the city at all cost. He didn’t think that plan was wrong in that it anticipated the enemy deployment. But.

Right, “but”…

Their opponents were the sorcerer’s military forces. Whenever he thought of what was to come, every time he was about to draw a conclusion, that “but” reared its head.

Just as the west was finally coming together, Orba felt the same kind of unease as Ax did.

Chapter 4: Surūr’s Unit

Part 1

Before their departure to the front, the soldiers received a warm reception everywhere they went within the town. All of them were righteous martyrs about to embark on a holy crusade against Garda. With that, the west’s cooperation gained strength. Even those who had been enemies just yesterday stood shoulder to shoulder and sang the same songs, drinking the same wine together.

It had to be said however that this sense of solidarity was peculiar to the Zerdians and that Orba and the others, having come from Mephius, naturally didn’t receive the same warm welcome.

But instead, the night before leaving for the front, they were once more invited to Kay’s store. There was nothing luxurious but it was a feast prepared from the heart. Incidentally, Talcott wasn’t present. He had already found a new woman and was busy drawing her portrait and writing poetry.

Niels was also working at the eatery. He acted just as before, as though nothing had happened.

“But it would be great if this time could put an end to the fighting,” Kay, a better drinker than men, muttered with red cheeks. After that, her eyes suddenly started shining. “Say, this is just my idea but, once this fight is over, won’t Tauran definitely be more peaceful than in the past?”

“Oh, why’s that?” Gilliam asked.

“Well, so many countries are joining hands to beat back Garda. Won’t the higher-ups all realise how stupid it is to always be fighting among fellow Zerdians?”

“If that happens, we’ll be out of work. And after we got to the point of being mercenaries and thanks to Mr. Captain, the pay’s good.”

“It’s fine, isn’t it, you can think about it after it’s all over. You’re a strong guy, so you’ll have

plenty of work. And that ladies' man there looks like he'd have no trouble conning money out of lots of women."

"W-Who would!?"

Shique nearly spat out his drink. When it came to romantic relationships, he was to the core a self-confessed misogynist, but on the other hand he commonly talked with women like Kay and he had been worried about her when Helio fell.

"As for the masked captain… Er…"

As Kay faltered, Gilliam laughed heartily.

"Ha ha ha. This guy isn't good with anything except swords. He isn't suited for any kind of job. Just imagine him listening to a boss and baking bread. Ah, no good, I'm laughing so much my stomach's gonna burst."

"Yeah, it wouldn't work. Kind of like you when you're whispering sweet words to women."

"Whaat!"

As usual, Orba and Gilliam did not make good drinking partners. And even less so as Talcott wasn't around today.

"Yes, yes," Kay waded in to stop the two in his stead. "When it comes to you, I can't tell whether you get on well or badly. Even if every single country stops fighting, you'll definitely always be quarrelling. Without just going your separate ways."

Kay certainly didn't think that everything would be over just like that. Undoubtedly, the western countries were currently united to face a common threat, but this was no miraculous occurrence and the same thing had happened a little over a decade ago. At the time, when none other than Mephius had invaded from the east, Kay had lost her father to the fighting.

The various countries of Tauran had banded together for a while to keep Mephius' aggression in check, but one only had to look at the current state of affairs to understand what had happened afterwards. By the very next month, the Zerdians who had raised cries of victory together and shared celebratory drinks in triumph had started getting into skirmishes with their neighbouring states.

Kay knew that Zerdian temperament all too well. But it was a woman's role to see the men off to the battlefield and to prepare banquets with as cheerful a feel as possible.

And yet…

And yet this time, although Kay didn't know if the atmosphere she sensed was the same throughout the west, the mood in Tauran was certainly different from what it had been during the war with Mephius. A major reason for that was probably that this wasn't an outside aggression but something that presented the aspect of a civil war in which all Zerdians were caught up.

It couldn't be denied that this was the result of the cycle that they themselves had repeated.

Will the fighting still not end?

It wasn't only one woman managing a restaurant who held that thought, but also the soldiers who went out on a spree with their mates before leaving for the front in an attempt to forget their dread of the battlefield, the lovers who gazed up at the night sky even as the soldiers' carousing reached their ears, the women who went to the temples of the Dragon Gods faith to buy protective charms for their husbands and sons, and even the officers who were even now working out strategies probably felt the same.

With his characteristically keen senses, Orba could feel the change carried on the western wind.

But for that… There was still something missing in Tauran. When he came to a conclusion about what it was that was missing, Orba felt as though he had betrayed his own self. So he didn't say a word and he didn't push forward with any concrete plans.

The soldiers led by Surūr Wyerim left Helio about two weeks after Orba was incorporated amongst them. After stopping for a while in Cherik and taking in the remaining soldiers to reach the allocated one thousand, they set their sights on Kadyne.

For two days, they marched and camped before finally arriving at the relay-station town that was located a little over a third of the way to Kadyne. An advance party had already surveyed the area.

Orba had heard about it before. That in order not to impede trade throughout the west, even for those who spent all of their time at war, it was practically a rule to safeguard the coming and going of travellers and merchant caravans along the highways from the Zer Tauran era. This relay-station town too seemed to have formerly prospered thanks to the incessant traffic of goods and people that were linked to trade with the coastal countries, as well as to Cherik exporting produce grown near Lake Soma to allied countries.

The "formerly" was because since Garda's army had seized control of almost all of northern Tauran, trade had all but ceased to be carried out. Now all that could be seen were a few prostitutes and peddlers who followed after the soldiers.

The thousand soldiers occupied the town's inns, the Dragon Gods temple and even the empty houses of the townspeople.

As they still had a long way to go, Surūr would normally have allowed the soldiers some degree of freedom, but the battle was close at hand. Night had fallen when the various unit commanders were summoned to the temple-turned-headquarters. It was larger than the temples of the Dragon Gods faith found in Taúlia and in Helio, and it was filled to the brim with icons such as weren't seen in Helio. It seemed that worshippers had been allowed to come and go as they pleased. Advance parties had been sent out in every direction and the information from the scouts was then collected together.

"It appears that the second company's vanguard unit was fired upon at a village near the highway."

"The enemy seems to have soldiers lying in ambush in the villages."

"Should we crush them systematically?"

Orba was at the edge of the temple and was looking around him thinking that it gave a strange impression how even if the location changed, the buildings of the Dragon Gods faith didn't change.

Information was of course pivotal in war. Straining his ears hard, he stored ever detail in his chest.

There was a fortress at the border with Kadyne and eight hundred soldiers were said to be defending it. They exceeded them in numbers but if the Kadyne side gave their utmost in defence, two hundred soldiers couldn't be considered much of a difference. For the offence, having twice the enemy's numbers was desirable. The Eimen capture force should soon be leaving from Helio. One opinion held that as the distance between them was not yet so great, they should send a messenger on horseback to ask for reinforcements, but Surūr immediately rejected that proposal.

Oh?

Beneath his mask, Orba raised his eyebrows slightly. He glanced quickly at Surūr's face. Then he turned his eyes to the company commander standing next to him, Bisham. He too was a Helian soldier. With his gentle personality and appearance, he had an atmosphere like that of a father who would make a good playmate for the neighbouring street kids.

"Orba-dono," he called out after making an eye signal to Orba. "What is your opinion?"

It was probably just out of consideration for Orba who had enlisted with Lasvius' endorsement. Bisham didn't have any kind of hidden agenda but the eyes of every one of the

Zerdians seated there turned to look at Orba.

Right then.

While keeping Surūr's face at the edge of his field of vision, Orba deliberately stood up as though to say that he had indeed been waiting to make a statement during the meeting. The area fell silent.

"It's one thing if we are only going to keep Kadyne in check, but if we intend to take it then I wonder if reinforcements aren't necessary. If we take Kadyne, with Fugrum and Lakekish in check further north, we should be able to encircle Zer Illias."

"The soldiers we have now are enough," Surūr shook his head. A faint smile appeared on his lips. "Even in this town, there have been no less than a hundred youths and mercenaries who have begged to join us. As we liberate villages from here on, I imagine that our numbers will increase more and more. Even if they quarrel, Zerdians band together when the west is in danger. No doubt foreigners can't understand the western temperament."

Several of the people at the meeting laughed in agreement. Through his mask, Orba looked briefly at Surūr's round face. *He's getting impatient*, he realised intuitively.

He had gotten quite a bit of information about Surūr Wyerim in Helio. His war record wasn't bad. Or rather, he was man who was comparable to the dragoon commander Lasvius. Yet despite being that kind of man,

Or better said, because he's competing with Lasvius,

He was eager to capture Kadyne. Overly so.

After all, to all appearances, the one who bore the sole merit of rescuing Helio from Greygun and Garda's army was Lasvius. Of course, when Surūr received Lasvius' call to rise to arms, he had single-handedly stirred up an impressive ruckus in town, but compared to Lasvius, who had defeated Greygun himself, his achievements appeared plain indeed. Needless to say, the one to receive immense support from the people was also Lasvius.

Moreover, during the time when he had lain hidden in the Belgana Summits waiting for his chance, he had safeguarded King Elargon's orphan son, Rogier Helio. Rogier was still only nine years old but he was the royal family's legitimate heir.

Surūr must have been feeling completely eclipsed by Lasvius. For that reason, having been appointed as the officer in charge of capturing Kadyne, he was eager to make a name for himself there. If a commander could work zealously in a good direction, the reverse was of course also true. Unfortunately, Surūr's case was the latter.

“Lasvius said that you had the resourcefulness of a strategist. Where do you expect the enemy to attack from?”

Not only had he tossed his opinion aside, he was testing him. In that way, he was also showing his contempt for Lasvius who had recommended Orba.

Orba turned his eyes to the map on the table. After thinking for a moment, he pointed to a spot and Surūr flashed a broad smile.

“Good. We’ll place the vanguard on lookout there. If the enemy comes, they will immediately inform the main body of troops.”

The fifty-three mercenaries were sent out as scouts.

Orba’s judgement had not erred. Halfway along the route from the relay-station town, there was a mountain pass suitable for the enemy to prepare an ambush and they kept watch over it throughout the night.

But enemy soldiers did not appear. There were a number of people on the road, but they were a group of Zerdians who had come from the west to join Surūr’s unit and as such, they tended rather to validate his confident attitude. In the end, Orba’s unit had no choice but to return empty-handed, to which Surūr simply said “Good work”.

Orba had taken back Helio along with Lasvius and was, so to speak, a minor hero. When the story went around that the commander had taken the foreign hero down a peg, the effect rapidly spread and affected the general atmosphere. Although more than half of Orba’s mercenary unit were Zerdians, they were left isolated within the thousand soldiers.

It was the same even after the fighting started.

Two days later, the troops aiming for Kadyne momentarily veered west off the highway. From there on, the road leading to the border twisted and turned, and was deliberately built so as to be a detour. It was taboo throughout the west to blockade the highways, to attack merchant caravans or to hinder trade. Equally, there was an unwritten law to avoid building forts or castles along the highways. And so, using plausible excuses like “maintaining the trade routes”, the countries changed the layout of the highways to make the roads inconvenient for enemy soldiers on the march.

Two hundred enemy soldiers lay in ambush in a village along that bypass to the west and fighting broke out. Their plan was to attract attention with a highly manoeuvrable cavalry unit, then launch several medium-size dragons to disrupt the troops formation. Surūr however remained calm and, personally leading his soldiers, repelled the attack with almost no losses.

Thereafter, platoon leaders and company commanders were sent out from the relay-station

town to crush the hostile forces posted all around. As Surūr's troops were superior in vigour and in numbers, victory was assured.

"They're probably sending out soldiers sporadically to dull our steps. But we are used to this kind of warfare."

In western wars, there were often skirmishes involving several hundred units of soldiers. It was the first time that Surūr led a thousand men but he skilfully pulled together that large army corps.

After each battle, the captains returned to headquarters with war trophies as souvenirs. Some even included guns and cannons snatched from the enemy. Getting drunk on alcohol they had obtained from the villages' storehouses – who knew whether they had received it or had plundered it – officers and men boasted every night about their own achievements.

Orba's unit however did not join that circle. It wasn't that they didn't take part in the fighting. Far from it: Surūr actively incorporated them in the battle formations. However, they didn't earn any war trophies. Or better said, they weren't given a chance to.

"That Surūr really is a sly son of a bitch."

It was no wonder that Talcott cursed him bitterly. The commanders of each company that Orba's unit was integrated into must have received orders from Surūr since they rarely stood at the front and they were only put to use protecting bivouacs and acting as the rear guard.

Neither their swords nor their armour had been wetted in enemy blood and all fifty-three of them were uninjured. At headquarters, they felt increasingly humiliated.

"Yeah, I guess this is how whores who have to go on the tout without makeup feel," Gilliam was also irritated. He was a heavy drinker but, obviously enough, he didn't want to receive leftovers from the boastful, merry-making Zerdians.

Amongst it all, Orba didn't display any emotions whatsoever. Instead, he galloped off every time with his subordinates to reconnoitre the villages that were under enemy control. Because it was a drab and dangerous duty that nobody wanted to undertake, he and his unit continued to take the lead in it.

"He's desperate to curry favour because the other units have gotten all the glory."

Orba was perfectly aware that that kind of malicious rumour was being whispered.

"That guy, what's he thinking?" Talcott asked Shique as they were galloping along just as night was about to fall.

“Why?” Shique seemed amused.

“It’s normal that you can’t read his expression since he’s masked, but since he became captain, he’s even more taciturn than before.”

“That’s true. He is like *that*.”

He received no other answer. Only Shique seemed satisfied while Orba, who was comparing the surrounding topography to the map in his hand, looked into the distance from horseback.

Just as Surūr had said, every time they pushed back Kadyne’s forces, volunteers from the villages flocked to join them. As Surūr’s troops continued their steady advance, the people of Kadyne started to hope that they might claim the city and recover their family members who had been taken hostage by Garda’s army. Although it no doubt gave them mixed feelings that the ones they were fighting were also soldiers from Kadyne.

Having finally subjugated the surroundings, Surūr’s troops moved their headquarters west. Although the new quarters were only slightly smaller than the previous relay station, they were barely able to house the thousand soldiers. The story went that Garda’s forces had also been posted there but, frightened by Surūr’s irresistible advance, they had fled three days earlier.

Instead of gunshots and the roars of dragons, what greeted Surūr’s troops was the people’s enthusiastic welcome. Some were already extolling Surūr as the west’s greatest hero. Delighted by this and in light of their overwhelming victory up to that point, Surūr allowed his men a certain amount of freedom in order to rest from their fatigue.

Surūr himself, his helmet removed, received a warm reception from the town’s leading figures. He was especially pleased when smoked fish was served by fishermen from Kadyne’s lake district. Fish was a rare treasure in Tauran. Wine was also brought out. Surūr emptied his wine cup in great good humour but someone was coming towards him with rough footsteps. They were still wearing a cuirass and had a sword hanging from their waist.

“What is it, you’re being loud.”

“We need to get away from here at once.”

Orba spoke vigorously. Surūr’s eyebrows were as narrow as his eyes and he drew them into a frown.

“What?”

“In terms of defence, there are only the rocky hills to the south, everywhere else is exposed. If the enemy comes, we won’t be able to defend it.”

“A strict watch has been placed.” As there were local dignitaries present, Surūr did not raise his voice angrily but he appeared to be seething. “The enemy’s main force is at the border fortress. They probably intend to ambush us there. They won’t be foolish enough to come here when they are hopelessly outnumbered.”

Surūr spoke triumphantly so as to let those around them hear.

“However…”

“Unlike you, who hasn’t fought once, the soldiers and I need to rest.”

This guy is absolutely desperate for glory – that thought was clearly written on the battalion commander’s face. As though he had been struck with a sudden idea, he said,

“If you’re that scared of an attack, I’m happy to leave the watch to you. Go and stand to attention with a spear all night.”

“I’ll do just that,” Orba turned away, looking furious.

Surūr had meant it as ridicule but Orba took him at his word and went to get involved in organising the watch. Only a hundred soldiers were on shift as lookouts but he increased these to two hundred to the north and fifty each to the east and west.

However, no matter how much he may have had the verbal consent of the battalion commander Surūr, nobody would be willing to take orders from an outsider. The soldiers who had suddenly been assigned to night watch voiced their displeasure and, in the end, more than half of the ones that Orba had newly assigned arbitrarily left their posts and were said to have gone drinking.

Feeling sorry for him, Company Commander Bisham took fifty of his own men and lent them to Orba, but their number was simply insufficient.

“What? Another hundred?”

“Spear-wielding infantrymen would be good. If we don’t gather at least that number, we can’t lead an assault.”

“An assault,” Bisham rubbed his chin a little agitatedly. In this situation, he didn’t know if should yell at the foreign newcomer or laugh him off.

But in the end, he added another hundred. With that, the defence stood at three hundred and fifty men. For some reason, Orba positioned half of them to the north and also had his own unit stand sentry there.

He himself, after making arrangements with Bisham, slipped secretly out of the town. Taking only a few of his men, he headed towards the rocky hills that protected the town to the south. They weren't particularly tall but the slopes were steep whichever way one went.

Just as the sun was about to set,

"Here," said Orba.

They were at a flat ledge that projected outwards and which commanded an unbroken view of the town.

The sun soon set and the town was faintly rimmed with the fires lit by the guardsmen. The laughter of soldiers rose incessantly from the town's streets.

"To the Dragon Gods who rule over the protection of Tauran!"

"To the false Garda's last moments!"

Each called out as they raised their wine cups together in a toast. Many other soldiers were making pillow talk with prostitutes by describing their own feats in battle.

Midnight was drawing near.

Just as the town was quieting down, the roar of artillery fire resounded. Cannonballs hit the trees, smashing several of them as fires started to spread. The flames were like living creatures as they extended further around them and while the soldiers on guard did their best to fight them back, the sound of cannons thundered again two then three more times.

All at once, the slumbering town was in uproar. There were those who were running around trying to extinguish the flames, those who, without taking their sword or spear, were escaping in a panic, believing that lightning was falling from the sky, and those who, although pulling their horses with their sword in hand, were at a loss not knowing where to go.

Surūr immediately rushed out into the street.

"What were the guards doing?"

"T-The attack seems to be coming from the south. From the rocky hills."

Before he even had time to answer "What?", more news came flying.

"It's Nilgif!"

It took Surūr a long time to realise that the soldier who was shouting was from Orba's mercenary unit. He simply opened his eyes wide.

“Nilgif is leading dragoons and cavalry, about five hundred are charging this way!”

Part 2

Just as his name of Kadyne's Blue Dragon indicated, Nilgif wore a helmet shaped like a dragon and donned blue armour. The difference with his brother wasn't only the colour of his armour but also the fact that the top of his helmet only had a single horn.

He rode his horse at the head of the five hundred soldiers.

Up until then, he had given his companions the order to deliberately scatter during skirmishes. The plan was for them to seem thoroughly routed. They had even made sure to deliberately abandon valuable weapons like guns and cannons so that the enemy would not be able to see through their intentions. There were of course those who were killed in this warfare based on withdrawal. It was an honour for warriors to die in battles in which they had fought to the last, but in these battles they had known from the start that they would be running away.

But even so, they obeyed my orders.

Nilgif was by nature easily moved to tears. Even in the middle of an assault, he was prone to being unable to hold back the emotions that welled up within him.

You won't have died in vain. Here and now, we will deal a crushing blow to these one thousand soldiers.

Nilgif had two mortars be transported beforehand to the southern hills. Since as expected, the enemy had completely disregarded caution to the south, the first shot was fired as the signal for the assault.

"Riiight. Let's go!"

Once the soldiers standing guard at the west of the town came into sight, Nilgif raised his rough voice.

Abandoning the lit fires, they were about to swing their long spears from horseback or fix them under their arms.

Just then, the fourth cannon shot rang out.

"Urgh!"

Gravel flew up and hit Nilgif in the face. No, it wasn't only gravel that flew. With it was the flesh and blood of his companions. As Nilgif halted before it, his now bloodshot eyes stared

at the impact point from which white smoke was rising up and where his companions and their horses lay prone. He knew that the bombardment must have come from the rocky hills. He knew it, but –

“Impossible!”

At the same time,

“Right. Let’s go.”

Someone gave the same order as Nilgif had.

It was Orba, who at some point had arrived to defend the west side. Raising his spear high, he took the lead, galloping in the van. Following behind him were the fifty-three from his unit, the hundred and fifty pikemen that Bisham had loaned him and the hundred infantrymen who were originally on sentry duty.

“That bastard saw right through them, huh,” his battle-axe heaved over his shoulder, Gilliam gave a broad grin.

The Zerdians were completely unable to hide their surprise but with the enemy approaching before them, the fact that the commander was a foreigner was no longer important. Spears in hand, they drew up to the mounted enemy unit.

Gunshots sounded once again. The fight had become a mêlée but those who had brought the guns to the hills and those who had been targeted had had their allies and enemies completely switched around.

If I were the enemy, I would definitely attack from the south. It was because he thought so that Orba went to reconnoitre the hills. And there, as expected, he found a suitable ledge.

Here? Orba found traces of several humans having been there recently. There was no mistaking that the soldiers of Kadyne had checked the place out before leaving the relay-station town. Realising that they intended to bring out mortars, Orba had left a few men there. All of them were outstanding swordsmen. Shique was among them. And naturally, he also left soldiers who were experienced at bombardment.

Orba’s plan proved to be right on the mark. In the dead of night, several dozen soldiers brought dismantled mortars. After waiting for them to assemble them, Shique and the other swordsmen leapt out. The enemy didn’t even have time to brace themselves against the swords before being cut down in one fell swoop.

“First fire at the outskirts of the town,” Orba had ordered them in advance. One reason was as a signal to lure the enemy troops, the other reason was to wake up their allies who were

indulging in indolence. “If the enemy charges, fire another shot there. The rest is our job.”

From atop his horse, Orba crossed spears with the mounted warrior who was at the head of the enemy troops. Sparks flew from the tips and the two horses had passed by each other before they had finished fading.

A feeling of heaviness remained in Orba’s arm. His opponent was a master at the spear. And going by the shape and colour of his helmet and armour…

“Nilgif.”

He turned his horse back as he shouted. For his part, Nilgif was also surprised to recognise his adversary.

“A masked swordsman. It’s you!”

It was without a doubt the opponent his brother Moldorf had told him about. Every time the masked swordsman appeared, he had gotten in his brother’s way.

So he’s the one who saw through my plan?

Feeling as though his head would explode at any moment from his seething enthusiasm, Nilgif gave his horse’s flank a sharp kick.

Orba and Nilgif passed each other again. With an unpleasant sound, the spear in Orba’s hand broke. Taking heart, Nilgif turned back once more. Orba however was already galloping away without turning back.

“Are you running away, you bastard!”

Nilgif was about to spur his horse forward but on either side of him, the spears of the enemy pikemen were already driving him hard. Kadyne’s cavalry formation had been thrown out of order by that cannon shot. They were being polished off one-by-one.

“Ah, wait!” Nilgif unintentionally raised his voice in a childish cry. He realised now that the masked swordsman had deliberately lured him in.

“Ngh!” As Nilgif suddenly leaned his head to the side, a broken spear whirled past.

Orba, the one who had thrown it, was flanked on either side by spear-wielding foot soldiers and pulled out his sword while still on horseback.

“Aim for that one rider,” Nilgif shouted but,

“Nilgif, what’s the matter? Your older brother magnificently knew when to quit.”

“W-What!”

A pikeman brandished his spear. Nilgif jabbed left and right with his spear and was about to break free but Orba raced to follow after him. He barely managed to stop a blow from the longsword with the top of his shoulder.

Nilgif ground his teeth. He knew that the enemy already held the momentum. Since their mortars had been snatched from them, if they needlessly prolonged things the enemy would swarm at them from the gates.

If you have to retreat, retreat. As long as you live, a day will surely come when you can wash away your disgrace.

Those weren’t the words of the masked swordsman but the teachings he had received from his brother Moldorf and which had been thoroughly hammered into him. Nilgif was quick to work himself into a frenzy but he had made preparations for this night raid while fully aware of the risk for his allies. He couldn’t allow anymore of his men to lose their lives.

“Eei, retreat. Retreat,” Nilgif said in a gruff voice that was much like his brother’s then, brandishing his spear, he sent flying in one go the mass of spearheads rushing towards him. For a moment, Orba also chased after him but, just like his brother, Nilgif did not allow him to draw up to him from behind.

A pursuit battle in the dead of night was dangerous anyway. What lay ahead from the relay-station town was still in Kadyne’s sphere of influence. Orba reared his horse bolt upright and raised his sword to halt his allies’ steps.

The fifty-three from Orba’s unit lifted their swords and spears high to starry sky and gave a shout of victory.

Among them, Orba returned the sword to his waist and stared intently at his right hand which was clasping the hilt. It was still numb and his grip strength hadn’t returned at all.

No doubt about it, his spear is as overwhelming as his brother’s.

Their names were famed in the worn-torn west. Moldorf and Nilgif; it was fine as long as it was one or the other, but if from here on the twin Red and Blue Dragons appeared together on the battlefield, things would certainly become very difficult.

When they returned to the town, Surūr Wyerim was waiting at the gates. His armour seemed to have been hastily thrown on, the cords to attach it were undone and he was missing a shoulder pad. The soldiers lined up behind him were in a similar state.

“Will there be even a single word of praise?”

When Gilliam said that, Talcott, who was riding beside him, laughed quietly.

“Who knows. But looking at that face he’s pulling, don’t get your hopes up.”

And in truth, between the lit torches held by soldiers on either side of him, Surūr’s face was trembling with rage. At the same time, Shique’s party who had gained control of the hills also made it down. After giving them some words of appreciation, Orba nimbly jumped from his horse.

“Why,” Surūr spoke. Even the moustache of which he was so proud was swaying and trembling. “Why did you stay silent when you knew the enemy was coming?”

Not upfront, Orba thought for a second. Those were not words that should be spoken in front of the soldiers. At least in public, he should have praised him, saying “good work” or something. *Then I could have answered that “I was just doing what you told me to, commander” and the merit would have become partly yours*.

In the same way as with Lasvius, when Orba couldn’t stand someone, there was a good chance that they hated him too. Surūr must also be capable, otherwise he wouldn’t have been entrusted with the command of the detached force. In this case, they probably just had poor affinity. When it came to Lasvius, he couldn’t tolerate Orba’s provocative way of doing things.

“I didn’t know it. I just had a hunch that they would come.”

He had had that hunch since that time when Surūr had ordered him to find where they would set an ambush. It was the perfect place to stage an attack, yet the enemy hadn’t despatched a single soldier there. Moreover, having taken part in the fights in various locations, Orba had thought it suspicious that the enemy was withdrawing so quickly. After carrying out thorough reconnaissance of the area, he had confirmed that the enemy had secured a path of retreat beforehand.

It looked like the enemy was deliberately using small numbers to entice them.

But Surūr didn’t want to listen.

“Were you in that much of a hurry to earn some merit? I have a thousand men to look out for. Did you not think that your selfish actions would endanger your comrades?”

“What!”

The previously calm and composed Talcott’s expression had changed. He started speaking faster than Shique could hold him back. “Is there anyone who can know for certain when the enemy will appear? When our captain was the only one to warn that they would probably

come, didn't you say you were handing over the soldiers to him? Except most of those bastards vanished without permission. In a hurry to earn some merit? You should try saying that when looking in a mirror."

Talcott wasn't the kind to bottle up what he wanted to say. He took this opportunity to let it all out. Attacked where it hurt, Surūr kept silent.

This is an ugly atmosphere right after a victory, Shique bit his lip while watching the nearby scene.

The difference in nationalities also looked likely to be a problem. The actions that Orba had taken had undoubtedly saved his allies from being routed and what Talcott had said was also entirely true, but – starting with Surūr – what was reflected in the eyes of the Zerdians who hadn't had the chance to fight wasn't so much admiration as anger. Talcott was from the coastal countries but to the Zerdians it would probably be the taken as "Those despicable Mephians defying the Battalion Commander."

Both sides glared at each other for a moment, their eyes gleaming red in the torchlight. Then,

"Is there any liquor left?"

Orba spoke from behind his mask. Surūr's eyebrows twitched.

"What? Liquor?"

"For the soldiers who were standing guard. Otherwise it's unfair, since unlike you fuckers, they weren't getting wasted."

Orba!

To Shique's horror, when Orba blithely threw oil on the fire, Surūr seemed for a moment to tilt towards the right then his fist sank into Orba's jaw. Standing behind him, Stan hurriedly caught him as he seemed to fall over backwards.

A stir ran through the soldiers.

"Don't get full of yourself, boy," Surūr's narrow eyes flared open. "Don't think that Mephians can do whatever they like in Tauran. You'll wield your sword the way I tell you to. Understand!?"

Surūr should probably have thought about the fact that at that instant, the commotion among the soldiers did not take the form of a shout of approval. About three hundred Zerdians had stood sentry with Orba and the others and had cooperated with them in the fight. Surūr's fist had pulverised their joy over their victory and their pride in having accomplished such a feat.

“B-Bastard!”

“Stop. Stop it!”

Gilliam, Talcott and the short-tempered mercenaries started to step forward while Shique and the Zerdians they had fought alongside got between them to prevent it.

The night air mixed with the smell of the burning trees that had been hit by the cannonballs.

The next day, after Surūr had finished reorganising the troops, they finally set out on their march proper on Kadyne. Orba’s unit was of course removed from under Surūr’s direct command and was attached to Bisham’s company.

“That wasn’t like you.”

During the journey, Shique called out to Orba who was in front of him. Because their horses had been confiscated, all members of the unit were on foot. As Orba remained silent, he continued,

“This being you, I’d have thought you would handle it better. That said, it’s different if you’re intending to wrest the entire battalion away from Surūr.”

“A pain.”

“Me? Or you?”

“An incompetent commander is a worse pain than the enemy.”

Shique had to stop himself from bursting into laughter. It was rare for Orba to justify his own quick temper, be it by referencing second-hand knowledge gleaned from a book or by referring to something he had actually experienced.

“You’re riled up, huh. At any rate, both when you were a gladiator and when you were a prince, you were a genius at riling up your opponents.”

“Shut up.”

The boy’s real face showed through the mask.

That evening, one of the scouts came rushing up on horseback.

“Ho,” Surūr gave a slight smile upon receiving the news. The report stated that the border fortress was completely empty. Since Nilgif’s night raid had failed, he had pulled back the soldiers and they were probably planning on waiting in Kadyne itself.

However, the news that the scouts brought the next day left no only Surūr but all the soldiers completely baffled. The soldiers had all vacated Kadyne, their own country.

Part 3

When he heard the order, Nilgif wore an expression of complete incomprehension.

“Where are we withdrawing to?”

“You will proceed to Eimen and await the alliance’s main army there,” the sorcerer stated baldly and as usual his expression didn’t seem quite human. It was as though he was telling some fable that had nothing to do with reality.

“Ridiculous. If we do that, the troops that are advancing on us here will target us from behind.”

“Don’t worry about what you don’t need to worry about. We won’t just stand by and allow ourselves to lose manpower.”

“Wait. In the first place, wasn’t it *your* order to defend Kadyne to the death?”

As he spoke, Nilgif’s eyes went to the men standing behind the sorcerer. They had just been despatched from Zer Illias. They were every bit as eerie as the sorcerer. As they were all covered in black armour, they hardly had a single patch of exposed skin. Their faces were completely concealed by the black cloths that hung from their helmets.

I wouldn’t be particularly surprised even if there were skeletons rather than living faces behind those cloths.

Since earlier, they hadn’t spoken a word nor stirred a muscle. They were so stiff it impossible to tell if they were even breathing. Those black-clad swordsmen numbered about a hundred and fifty in all. He didn’t know how powerful they were, but it was obvious that they wouldn’t be able to defend Kadyne by themselves once Nilgif and the almost eight hundred soldiers under his command were gone.

The sorcerer however was the same as ever.

“The preparations have been completed. You did well stalling for time. Now do as I say. The enemy is approaching.”

The sorcerer gave absolutely no answer to the questions of what those preparations were or what kind of plan they had to repel the enemy. Nilgif scratched his nose with a bitter expression.

Shit, I lost so many comrades just like that. Thinking to annihilate the enemy here, I returned to Kadyne. And now?

Given that their orders were constantly changing, he was struck with the thought that something might have happened to make Garda feel shaken.

With this timing, could it be…

"As I told you before," at that moment, the sorcerer gave a faint smile, causing Nilgif to shudder. Not because he read a human emotion in it. A doll which had been brought to life and which was imitating humans would smile exactly like that. "It's best not to think about what you don't need to worry about. We will stay here and guard the people. If you seem about to disobey your orders and return to the city, or join with the alliance, we will decapitate every last one of them."

"You," his teeth barred, Nilgif looked like some carnivorous animal. "Wait. You're staying here? What are you fuckers going to do when the enemy gets here?"

"Die, of course."

At the sorcerer's response, Nilgif once more looked dumbfounded. He had always thought them baffling, but he hadn't realised that it was to that extent. The sorcerer and the hundred and fifty newly despatched swordsmen were apparently going to await the enemy in Kadyne with the express intention of dying.

"Ah, but don't think of waiting for that and then returning to Kadyne."

"You're going to bring up my family again, aren't you? I get it!" Nilgif all but yelled before leaving, unable to bear that uncanny man any longer.

But depending on how you think about it…

It wasn't a bad thing. Garda intended to relinquish Kadyne. The sorcerer and his group would remain here to prevent Nilgif and the others from seizing the opportunity to revolt. But setting their own situation aside, Kadyne would be freed. Even if the forces of the western alliance occupied it, they certainly wouldn't massacre its population.

And Garda will fall too. He had a real sense that it was happening. That one by one, the layers were being peeled off from that terrifying, uncanny phantom not of this world, and that they were slowly drawing closer to the living human beneath.

"Then since your mind is made up, we'll do as you say," Nilgif said out loud. He believed that as long as the people of Kadyne were safely freed then the sacrifices made would not be in vain.

And after that will be Zer Illias.

The Kadynians there were not few in number. Among them was Nilgif's family.

Would he live to see it again – his eyes blazed at the thought as gazed at his native land before turning to leave. There was no doubt that if the western alliance gained the upper hand, Garda would order him and his men to fight to the end. Even though they knew that nothing but ruin and death awaited them, they were unable to defy him and would only be able to obey.

However,

As they passed through the area of low-growing trees that characterized Kadyne, Nilgif urged the horses to go faster so as not to let his men grow mawkish – although he himself was the one most likely to indulge in sentimentalism. The soldiers knew their general's temperament and didn't say anything. They pretended not to see the large teardrops trickling like rain down his bearded face.

However… Yes, however, we will not die in vain. In this war, there has not been a single pointless death. The future generations will surely think so. No, they will definitely think so.

Surūr Wyerim's expression was even more impatient than usual.

"Hurry the horses. We will liberate Kadyne then immediately set off in pursuit."

What he feared the most was that the enemy forces that had left Kadyne would carry out a surprise attack on the main army sent to capture Eimen. Because that would be seen as a failure on his part.

There are too many things that just don't make sense about the enemy's timing in leaving Kadyne. Having drawn our troop there, Garda's army will use our delay to attack the main force in Eimen… But if that was their real plan, they would have left a few soldiers in Kadyne. By making us lay siege, they could slow us down, even if only by half a day, even if only by an hour.

Orba was seized with unease. Yet it wasn't the same kind of unease that he had experienced when he was the prince's body double. He left his unit and ran forward. On the way, he borrowed a horse from one of the mounted warriors and rode up to Surūr who was in the leading party.

"Commander."

"What," Surūr irritably looked over his shoulder. "Mephian gladiator, do you feel like taking

another blow from my fist?”

“The enemy situation is strange. You should consider setting up camp here for now and take the time to keep watch on Kadyne.”

“Idiot. The main force will soon be taking Eimen. What happens if they get attacked from behind by Kadyne’s troops? They’re the ones who want us to think that something is up so that we halt our pursuit.”

“But…”

“Shut up. Now go back to your position.”

Shit. The unknown unease that he had felt was exactly because of this. When he had been prince, he himself could move everything according to his own judgement. Of course, because of that the mental burden had been considerable, but now that he was in a situation where the commander was someone else and where he didn’t trust that other person’s judgement, his unease outstripped his former sense of strain.

It’s just like I said to Shique. Actually no, isn’t it like Shique said?

Orba bitterly regretted his childish revenge at the relay-station town. The man was uncongenial but if he had tried to get on with him, maybe he could have earned some credit which would have stood him in good stead in his current situation.

In a similar fashion, Noue, Garbera’s resourceful commander, and Lasvius, Helio’s commander of the dragoons had eventually joined forces with Orba in order to achieve their goals despite harbouring antipathy and irritation towards him, and they were able to reach a mutual trust. He couldn’t help but think that he had been very lucky in both those cases.

This is where I stand as just a mercenary, huh?

Orba’s brows creased in irritation while in his belly was an accumulated rage that didn’t seem likely to ever disappear.

He went straight back to his unit without returning the horse. There, he found Stan in a strange state.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Stan, I’m asking you what’s wrong,” Talcott was calling out to him while repeatedly shaking him by the shoulders but Stan wasn’t responding. His face had gone pale and his eyes drifted vacantly. As he was also walking unsteadily, Gilliam was supporting him.

“What’s wrong? What’s going on?” As their walking pace inevitably slowed down, they were

overtaken by other infantry units and mocking voices called out to them. “Is he scared to fight? The famous gladiators are pretty useless.”

“Idiots,” Talcott yelled, completely enraged. “Stan isn’t a gladiator. And he’s survived far tougher wars than you have!”

Orba jumped off his horse and peered into Stan’s face which was glistening with sweat.

“Come on, get a hold of yourself. Do you need to lie down for a bit?”

He wondered if maybe he had been injured in the previous fight. Stan didn’t answer and simply murmured something repeatedly. Because his voice was husky and low, Orba couldn’t make out what he was saying.

Their unit was marching more and more slowly. When they were almost at the end of the line, Orba came to a decision and, with Gilliam’s help, got Stan onto the horse. He then jumped up behind him and, with an “I’m going ahead,” he galloped off.

Less than an hour later, the open gates of Kadyne came into sight. Supporting Stan, who was shaking so much he almost fell from the horse, he passed through the gates. The town was filled with cheering and joyous voices. The people of Kadyne had all come to greet Surūr’s troops. Many of them were crying as they embraced each other. They had been hostages until just now, not permitted to live freely.

Did they really just abandon Kadyne?

While thinking that this was completely at odds with his earlier hunch, for now, Orba had something that he needed to do. He caught hold of one of the townspeople and got the name and address of a doctor from them. Turning into one of the central streets, there was a building with a sign, just as he had been told, but the doctor was absent. He had probably gone out to the streets to celebrate along with the rest of the population.

Clicking his tongue, Orba barged in anyway and helped Stan onto the bed inside.

Stan started muttering something again so Orba brought his ear near the other’s mouth.

“What’s wrong? Do you need something?”

“It’s coming.”

“What?”

“It’s coming, it’s coming, it’s coming. Malice is wailing, the dead are screaming, the sky is burning.”

Stan’s mutters sounded like the delirium of a person gripped by fever and made absolutely no sense. Yet chills ran up Orba’s spine and his flesh started to crawl. Just as Stan was about to murmur something more, a shadow suddenly passed over the sun and the room was plunged into semi-darkness.

Startled, Orba was about to rush to the window but faster than he could do so, and even though he was still inside the building, he heard an ear-splitting scream.

“M-Monsters!”

The streets of Kadyne were still filled with wave after wave of cheers.

The soldier on guard in the watchtower was gazing down on them contentedly then looked up to the sky as though something had caught his attention.

The clouds are moving fast.

Although the skies had been a clear blue, from the corner of his eye, he could now see black clouds surging forward. At first nonchalantly watching them, the soldier’s eyes were suddenly nailed to them, as though unable to tear themselves away. They weren’t just moving fast. The clouds covered the sun in an instant and the entire sky turned black.

The people who had been dancing and singing all turned their heads to the sky. Then they too stared. The black clouds squirmed and throbbed like giant entrails then in an instant broke apart.

Their fragments rained down, one of them piercing the soldier’s breast. Shaking violently, his body slumped forward and fell from the watchtower.

It resembled a violent rain shower. But unlike simple raindrops, when the black shadows that were diving down fell upon the people, they tore their faces and limbs to shreds.

The streets of Kadyne that had been filled with merrymaking were now awash with blood.

“Monsters!”

That was the point at which Orba heard that strange cry.

There were winged creatures. They were about the size of a human child and their bodies were covered in black fur. They had fangs and their faces looked like those of monkeys. The strange, unknown creatures flapped their wings and relentlessly swooped down on the people below.

Their claws effortlessly tore through human flesh and easily drilled holes through armour and helmets. Those claws sliced through the backs of the people who ran screaming, their fangs bit through the heads of women who cradled their children protectively to their chests, and they swarmed the soldiers who tried to fight them off with spears. What they left in their wake were shredded corpses, unrecognisable from their original form.

What is this? Orba had rushed out into the streets and for a moment, seeing the entire town coloured in black and red, he could only stare in shock.

While his eyes were completely riveted to the sight, two demons leapt towards him. Orba instinctively reached for his sword's grip. The next instant, he swung the sword twice. It unerringly mowed through the two bristly bodies – or it should have.

What!

The sword cleaved through empty air. Conversely, he felt a sharp pain in the back of his hand and wrist, and staggered backwards.

There was no time to remain stunned. A roar from the sky overwhelmed his sense of hearing and just as he was trying to figure out what it was, a new black shadow made its appearance. Looking up, Orba finally doubted his own sanity.

A huge dragon had appeared in the skies over Kadyne. It must have been forty or fifty metres long. It flapped wings that were even larger than its gigantic body and calmly flew through the sky.

Impossible.

It wasn't possible for that kind of dragon to exist. He had heard that there were flying dragons on a volcanic island in the south, but this creature with its huge body, its thick paws tightly covered in black scales, its two horns growing from their elongated head… this creature couldn't be anything but a product of the imagination. A long time ago, Orba had seen something similar in a picture book that his brother Roan had brought home as a souvenir.

In front of Orba, who was starting up astounded, the huge black dragon opened its mouth. Just as he realised what was happening, light flashed from its maw.

His instinct ordered him to duck. Even lying on his belly, he watched as far-off rooftops were blown away and debris flew as the beast breathed fire. A great many of the citizens had surely lost their lives. The dragon turned to prowl the skies once more as though searching for its next target.

Screams and wails resounded in Orba's ears and seemed to fill them completely, showing no sign of stopping. He used his sword to help himself stand back up.

This is… sorcery? That thought struck him. There was no doubt that the black demons and the dragon were the sorcerer's doing. This was why Garda's army had pulled out its troops.

Faced with those supernatural phenomena, the hairs on Orba's body stood on end and his mind seemed to go numb with fear. Despair flitted through his breast. If this was Garda's power, what could a sword do against it?

Another explosion erupted and Orba dived down again. When he lifted his head, a black demon was coming straight towards him.

He quickly scrambled to his feet and jumped backwards. As he jumped, he seized his sword. The movement was a deeply ingrained habit hammered into his body. When he landed, his sword was at the ready. He had made in time. Like this, he should surely be able to defend against the demon's claws.

But a sharp pain shot through the nape of his neck. The claws had effortlessly passed through his blade and their sharp tips brushed against him.

Chapter 5: Ether Disturbance

Part 1

The time had finally come.

Resolve burst from Raswan's brow like sparks struck from a flint. His eyes were stretched open wide and as he marched roughly forward, his usual cold expression replaced by one so different that he seemed like another person.

It was in that state that Raswan, fully armed and with more than twenty soldiers following behind him, appeared before the castle gate. The soldiers too wore helmets and armour. Only one in that group was not carrying a weapon: a lone middle-aged man. His face was pale and he appeared to be considerably agitated.

“What is going on?”

It was no wonder that the soldiers standing guard looked astonished. Incidentally, the soldiers acting as guardsmen for Taúlia’s castle – which could more aptly be called a manor – were subordinates of Toún Bazgan, Raswan’s father.

Without stating his business, Raswan simply said, “I’m going in. Move.”

“I will go and fetch Lord Toún. Please wait a moment,” sensing a somewhat dangerous atmosphere, one of the guards headed away from the gate. The gleam of his sword aimed at that soldier’s back signalled the start of Raswan Bazgan’s uprising.

Blood spurted and screams broke out from the assembled court servants. Raswan expressionlessly stepped over the guard’s corpse. He and the soldiers entered the castle.

The guards there couldn’t hide how shaken they were at facing Toún’s son Raswan. Above all, the vigour with which he strode through the castle was no ordinary thing. He gave the impression that if you approached him he would cut you down. Perhaps because the soldiers were overwhelmed by this, Raswan proceeded unimpeded into the castle.

The guards in front of the massive doors to the audience chamber however held their spears

crossways and barred his path.

“Stand back.”

“Stand down!”

They shouted in unison but here again Raswan didn’t waste his breath and resorted to force of arms. In the blink of an eye he cut down his fellow countrymen and soldiers, and wrenched open the imposing door to the throne room.

Within were Queen Jaina and Archduke Hirgo Tedos. They were in the middle of a meeting with the goodwill envoys had been sent from the various western countries. Having of course heard the commotion, they had all risen from their seats and had been on the verge of fleeing. Screams arose from the delegates at the sight of Raswan’s drawn and bloody blade, and even Jaina gasped.

At that point, fifty or so soldiers led by Toún Bazgan belatedly drew up behind Raswan. They glared at his soldiers who were blockading the still open door. Both sides unsheathed their swords simultaneously but Toún was so shaken and confused upon learning of his son’s actions that he was unable to give any orders.

“Raswan!” He called out loudly but Raswan neither answered his father nor even turned to look at him, merely fixing his gaze on the throne with eyes as piercing as a hawk’s.

“Have you gone mad, Raswan?” Archduke Hirgo shouted. He was the adoptive father of Bouwen Tedos, the commander of the Fifth Army Corps, and had served since the time of Ax’s father.

Raswan’s mouth twisted into a sneer.

“Mad? No, I have come to claim my rights as a legitimate descendant of the Bazgan line. Since that throne appears to be empty, won’t you give it to me?”

“What nonsense is this!” A tremor passed through Jaina’s cheeks. Her daughter Esmena greatly resembled her and she was usually a very gentle woman, but her expression now was markedly different from that usual. “This throne belongs to the father of the country, my husband Ax Bazgan. You should know that well!”

“The Bazgan throne is the throne of Zer Tauran. Isn’t that Ax’s favourite phrase?”

“What has that got to do with your behaviour?” Hirgo shouted over Raswan’s head to a point behind him. “Toún, seize this lunatic. For all that he is your son, this is nothing less than rebellion against Taúlia!”

The soldiers on both sides were as tense as a drawn bowstring, keeping watch for any sign of movement. But,

“Now, now. Hang on,” Raswan, the person responsible for this mayhem, spoke with startling nonchalance. “I’ve brought someone with me. Let’s first of all hear what he has to say.”

As he spoke, Raswan drew towards him the middle-aged man who was the only unarmed member of his group. He was a craftsman from the town. His face had been drained of all colour from the sudden bloodshed. His breathing was ragged and he seemed about to collapse at any moment.

But the words spoken by that nondescript man threw the hall into turmoil.

“Ridiculous,” Hirgo groaned but even his face had gone pale.

According to the man, roughly half a year earlier one of Governor-General Ax Bazgan’s subordinates had come to see him and had requested that he make a war fan. Moreover, he had asked that it be made to look the same as the one which usually hung from Ax’s waist. He had described the design of the handle in particularly minute detail. The handle of Ax’s favourite war fan encased the sovereign’s seal of the Magic Dynasty.

“You all remember it, don’t you?” As though to thoroughly observe the unrest caused by the man’s testimony, Raswan slowly swept his gaze around his surroundings. “Governor-General Ax Bazgan was captured at Apta during the campaign against Mephius. After that, Taúlia and Mephius suddenly made peace. Do you remember what was said at the time when the war fan disappeared for a while from his waist?”

“You, what are you trying to say?” Jaina asked, her face ashen. Raswan chuckled softly. “Are further words necessary? Governor-General Ax had the fan, and thus the sovereign’s seal of the Magic Dynasty, stolen from him by Gil Mephius. It was then used to threaten him into binding us in alliance with Mephius. As a member of the Bazgan House, no as a Zerdian, to have lost the sovereign’s seal is a dishonour. Yet Ax went further and in order to deceive those around him, he had this man make a substitute fan.”

The hall erupted into a furore. As Toún’s men looked at each other, Raswan alone listened coldly to his own words. The middle-aged man he had brought along was certainly a craftsman but he had in reality received no request from Ax to make a war fan. As Ax certainly understood that this was a situation which could influence the entire country, Raswan had not immediately been able to uncover any evidence. Ax had probably commissioned it abroad where he could conceal his identity. Or perhaps he had sealed the mouth of the craftsman who made the fan by having him killed in secret?

If he had a little more time, he would have investigated in more detail but he was in a hurry to press on. He had reluctantly and at great cost hired this man who was well-known within

Taúlia. Naturally, since he would become a hindrance in the future, Raswan intended to kill him quickly and pretend that he had gotten caught up in the drama of the rebellion.

However that may be, the hall was pulsing with agitation. Raswan took the opportunity to raise his voice.

“That damn Ax no longer has the right to be the head of the Bazgan House. Don’t you agree? I will take back the war fan with my own hands. Don’t we need a new ruler who will push anew for the revival of Zer Tauran?”

“D-Don’t be absurd,” sensing that the mood within the hall was turning, Hirgo also spoke in a deliberately loud voice as he inched his way towards Raswan. “Enough of your speculations. We should verify all this when his lordship returns. Since you deliberately chose a time when he was away, your schemes are as clear as day. Pull back here, Raswan. No matter what the circumstances, your actions are inexcusable.”

“You still don’t get it? If his lordship returns, then what? Do you think that Ax, who has had the sovereign’s seal snatched away from him and who has lost the right to be governor-general, will be able to overcome Garda? Now that the threat is closing in on the whole of the west, Taúlia needs a new leader.”

“I told you to pull back. Stand down now before it is too late.”

Even at the best of times, Raswan was an irascible man. When things didn’t go the way he wanted, creases would wrinkle his brow. He was filled with ample resolve and his nerves were stretched to breaking point for this grand, once-in-a-lifetime performance.

As the distance was short, Hirgo was unable to see it coming. At that moment, Raswan’s right arm swept upwards and brandished his sword, still dripping with blood, over his shoulder.

“Archduke!”

Jaina’s cry was too late. In one strike, Raswan’s blade tore through Archduke Hirgo Tedos from his right shoulder to his chest. Hirgo staggered, a bloody froth dribbled from his mouth then he collapsed backwards. For a moment, there was complete silence.

“S-Seize him!”

Now that it had come to this point, even Toún was forced to make a decision. He waved his right hand and gave his men the order to attack.

A bunch of spears gleamed within the hall. But the spearheads pointed towards Raswan amounted to no more than twenty. Of the remainder, twenty were turned against their comrades and ten were pointed at Toún himself who had just given that order. He had been

about to draw his sword and personally charge forward but was stopped in his tracks.

“You bastards,” he muttered in blank surprise as he stared at his subordinates’ faces. He didn’t know of course. That his men who were supposed to come rushing in reinforcement were all being held back in front of the castle gate. More than fifty of the soldiers who followed Raswan were there with their weapons at the ready.

“These are Lord Toún’s orders,” they announced and allowed nobody to pass inside. To make matters worse, the one who was leading them was the vice-commander and Toún’s right-hand man. No one except Toún Bazgan had the authority to countermand his orders, and Toún was inside the castle. Thus the soldiers who came running from elsewhere were disposed of.

Raswan didn’t spare a single glance for his father who was faced with those spears. He looked down at Hirgo’s remains at his feet and, his eyes dark, he muttered:

“I’ll declare war on Mephius and definitely take back the sovereign’s seal with my own hands. And then, Zer Tauran will be restored.”

At that moment, Ax’s daughter Esmena Bazgan had only just returned to her chambers. She had come back from paying a get-well visit to Bouwen who had been moved to a room inside the palace.

Esmena was relieved that her childhood friend’s health seemed to be improving steadily. It was just that having lost so many of his men, he couldn’t help but feel depressed.

“I wonder if there is some way of cheering Bouwen up.”

“You should go and visit him every day, Princess. Lord Bouwen will feel better from that alone.”

“Is that right?”

“That it is.”

“You are all smiling very strangely.”

In fact, the ladies’ maid found it heart-warming and lovely how Esmena was busying herself over Bouwen. As for being in low spirits recently, it was the same for Esmena. While worrying about her childhood friend’s health, the princess’ body and mind were gradually recovering and that made the ladies’ maids happier than anything.

The sunlight was warm; it was just another peaceful day.

Moments later, the atmosphere inside the palace changed completely.

The soldiers guarding the inner quarters thought that they could hear violent footsteps running.

“It seems like there is some kind of disturbance inside the castle. Princess, please don’t set a foot outside of here.” Having said that, they ran off with the same energy that they had arrived with.

Esmena’s heart started pounding.

After that, the ladies’ maids went out in turn and brought back the information they had received from the guards. When Esmena heard that soldiers led by Raswan Bazgan were attempting to seize control in the audience chamber, she felt as though reality was crashing down. She did not have a particularly good impression of Raswan but she would naturally never have imagined that he would plot a rebellion.

It went on. News flew that even Archduke Hirgo Tedos had been cut down. It also seemed that the castle gates were being blockaded and that the other soldiers would not be able to rush in to help. Which meant that the castle’s military strength amounted to the thirty men who were guarding the inner quarters. They had held a discussion behind the locked doors and had apparently agreed that when the time came, they would go and cross swords with the soldiers who were holding the gates.

The ladies’ maids were also thrown into a furore. At the head maid’s instructions, they were piling up sofas and desks in front of the door to build a temporary barricade.

Lord Gil. Amidst the flurry of her surroundings, Esmena felt like she wanted to collapse on her bed. Now when her father was away on the battlefield, the only one she could rely on was but a memory.

“Lord Bouwen has left his room,” the lady’s maid who had volunteered to act as liaison with the outside informed them through a gap at the door. “The overseer for the pageboys wanted to stop him but he was carrying a sword and glaring so fiercely it sent him running.”

A sound caught in Esmena’s throat. Archduke Hirgo Tedos was Bouwen’s adoptive father. He must want revenge. Even though he was recovering, he had been badly injured in battle. Could Bouwen really stand up to Raswan alone?

Ah, as Esmena rubbed her shoulders, she felt as though everything she knew was crumbling away. Her father wasn’t here, Archduke Hirgo had been slain, even Bouwen was hurrying towards the jaws of death. Even though the sun had risen on what should have been a normal day like all the others. Thinking about how the world had changed completely in so short a time caused her to feel almost dizzy and Esmena unsteadily sat down on her bed.

Unconsciously she reached for a packet that was leaning beside the bed and hugged it close. Simply from that, she felt as though it were transmitting warmth to her.

This is the proof of Mephius' alliance with Taúlia.

She would never be able to forget that voice with which the parcel was handed over.

Originally, it had been a gift from Gil Mephius to her father, Ax Bazgan. However, having brought it back, Esmena did not immediately hand it over to her father nor did she check its no doubt valuable contents, but instead hung on to it for a while. That was unusual for the docile Esmena. She had wanted to bask in the lingering scent of her one encounter with Prince Gil at Apta and for that she was prepared to afterwards face her father's wrath.

A few days later, she had finally been about to deliver it to him when news of Prince Gil's death had struck her ears like the toll of a bell announcing the end of the world. Gil's death and these events happening now all seemed like a bad dream.

A nightmare. Yes, a nightmare. I have been tormented for so long by a nightmare.

From the depths of darkness, the sorcerer who claimed to be Garda was calling Esmena's name. From the other side of those piled up shadows, hands stretched out to grab her hair and shoulders. Esmena felt that these current events were all a continuation of the nightmare that had once afflicted her.

Lord Gil, please come quickly. Dispel the demons that have taken hold of Taúlia. Dispel my bad dreams. Please.

As Esmena shut her eyes and held the parcel tight, taking refuge in the warmth of her memories, an eerie laugh crossed her mind.

Startled, her eyes flew wide open. For a moment, it had sounded like Garda's loud laughter which has terrified her so many times in her nightmares.

Isn't this supposed to be funny? That Prince Gil is alive?

But it was a laugh that had been uttered by the Mephian gladiator that she had invited to her chambers previously.

Gil is dead.

Begging your pardon, but what does the princess know about the crown prince? That kind of man should just be forgotten.

Esmena's shoulders trembled. Now, the words of that insolent gladiator sounded to her like a

rebuke from Gil himself.

She certainly knew nothing about Prince Gil. She didn't have the right to cry and indulge in sentiment. But… But even so, she felt like she understood. Crown Prince Gil Mephius would certainly scold her if he could see her now.

How would she appear to him, this woman who was crying and frightened, who could only beg for help when the country was in danger?

Esmena Bazgan's steel-grey eyes were clouded with tears, but determination flickered within them. And when she once more picked up the parcel, she understood its meaning for the first time.

Part 2

Blood spurted from the nape of his neck and Orba was on the verge of breaking his stance and falling backwards. The enemy continued to leap towards him..

His sword didn't connect. It had only been a light thrust to keep it at bay but even so it should have struck the demon's head, yet it passed right through.

"Guh!"

As he continued to retreat, Orba's entire body went cold. When it came to battle, no matter what the situation was, his blood would be boiling, yet now it ran as cold as if it were freezing. The feel of the sword that he grasped in his hand. The weight of the steel that was transmitted to his arm. As a swordsman who had faith in his ability to tear down any kind of obstacle, it was impossible not to fall into despair when his sword utterly failed to prevail, and despair in the middle of battle led only to death.

Sorcery.

It was something that should no longer exist in the human world, something that perhaps transcended the human world. Orba's movements had unwittingly lost their vitality. He was unable to do anything but simply continue to retreat until his back hit the wall of a house.

"Don't mess with me!"

In that instant, Orba's instinct for survival turned his fear into an anger whose embers' burned bright. But his blood still ran cold. It was no more than the desperate counterattack of a heavily wounded beast.

The black demon flapped its wings and dived diagonally down, barring its claws downwards. Orba stepped forward to intercept it and was about to swing his sword in a side sweep.

At almost exactly the same moment, the dragon spewed thunder again and as the colour of flames burst into sight to his right, Orba closed his eyes out of reflex.

Damn it!

Let alone his blood, it felt for a second as though every one of his bodily fluids had frozen solid.

He halted his sideways swing and was going to pull the sword towards his chest for a single blow from beneath but for some reason his body wouldn't move that way. His sword moved by an instinct that overcame reason and came into position in front of his face. And that sword parried a blow that came from directly opposite him.

"What!"

Staring wide-eyed, Orba noticed the figure of a demon swooping down from the side. But his awakened instinct told him to prepare for an attack from a different direction than the sight that was reflected in his eyes. Orba switched his body-weight to his heels, bent his knees and jumped two, three steps to the side.

He's…

The real attack differed from that which was visible. Above all, the wind that now struck him from the front was one that carried a stench that Orba's nose was familiar with – it was a wind created by a steel sword. To close his eyes for an instant and be able to grasp that correctly was thanks to his experience as a gladiator who had survived for six[3] years.

In that case – As he faced the demon that was leaping towards him, Orba pretended to stagger and lowered the tip of his sword. If the enemy was human, then it would attack the weak point that had been exposed. If his reading was off, it meant Orba's death.

The demon swooped down from the side – that was what was visible but an unhurried bloodlust was blowing from right in front of Orba. It was something which had also radiated from the bodies and swords of the gladiators that Orba had fought one-on-one and was a sensation particular to a sword.

Orba dropped the tip of his blade downwards and put all his energy into bending his knees and sinking towards the surface of the ground. Above his head, a raging tempest swept down. A t the same time, Orba's sword leapt like lightning from the ground and plunged into something.

The demon should have been on the verge of leaping at him from the right. But at that moment, the demon's figure vanished from sight and in its place appeared the black shadow of a person. Clad in black from head to toe was a swordsman with human limbs. The sword that Orba had thrust out was plunged deeply into its abdomen. Orba put all his strength into pulling it out. "Guh!"

The swordsman gasped and fell forward. He was clearly dying. A cloth hung from his helmet so that his face couldn't be seen, but there was no doubt that viscous, clotted blood was flowing from his abdomen and from the area around his mouth.

Breathing raggedly, Orba gazed at the blade that was smeared in blood and human fat then

once more examined his surroundings. Black-winged demons were chasing after the figures of the people and soldiers who were running, trying to escape. It was a strange scene. But was that entire pack of demons black-clad swordsmen like the one he had just struck down?

Is that the real nature of sorcery?

Did it dazzle people's eyes or trick their minds? Either way, it seemed certain that creatures such as these demons did not really exist. It looked like the aim was to plunge the soldiers who had entered Kadyne into chaos by having these soldiers who were cloaked in illusions commit repeated slaughter.

Orba considered exposing them one-by-one thanks to the sense that he had started to develop in the fight just now, but the number of enemies was unknown. If they realised that he had noticed their true shape, they would swarm around him alone.

That being the case – he couldn't go around breezily doing the right thing by saving the people and friendly soldiers who were about to get killed. In the current situation where only Orba had seen through the enemy, Kadyne seemed headed towards annihilation.

A man entered his field of vision, screaming and helpless to do anything as a demon's claws attacked him. At a distance he might be able to cross in time if he ran, a woman was lying in the street, shielding a child.

Orba closed his eyes.

But after that one brief instant, he resolutely opened his eyes wide and burned into his retinas the moment in which that man and that mother, whose names he didn't even know, lost their lives. Teeth tightly clenched, Orba turned back to the building he had come out from a little earlier. He intended to get Stan and leave the place at once. He needed to check whether Shique and the others had already entered Kadyne, then, if possible, he could give them his orders and they might be able to overturn the situation.

Stan had already raised himself on the bed.

"Orba."

He raised his eyes feebly. Orba was about to tell him not to move but, "Outside, there's an incredible amount of ether swirling about. Even just from here, my head feels like it's about to split."

"Ether? You can sense it?"

"Like this, it's the first time. This isn't normal. ……But, Orba," even though Stan's eyelids were trembling, his eyes were filled with strong purpose as he stared at Orba. "No matter

how huge it is, there is only one will controlling it. Take me with you. I might be able to tell where the enemy is."

Orba's thoughts spun quickly. He didn't really understand half of what Stan was saying. But however much sorcery lay outside the boundaries of common sense, even though it seemed like something out of a nightmare, if it was something that was handled through human skill,

I can stop this massacre.

If it could lead to that simple conclusion, he would consider any number of ways to fight.

If it came to it, he was a man who made decisions quickly. By nature, Orba believed that speed was of the essence in a fight.

"Right," Orba decided promptly. At any rate, they needed to hurry; while things stayed as they were, the damage would increase. Since Stan himself had decided to go, there was no point worrying about his health. Orba led him outside but then clicked his tongue. The horses were gone. They should have been tethered to a wooden post by the gate, but they had been frightened by the explosions and, violently tearing off the rope, had bolted.

Orba and Stan resolutely decided to run through the streets. While waiting for Stan, who tended to fall behind, Orba peered around the corner of the alleyways to check that there weren't any demons – or rather, enemy swordsmen.

Engulfed in flames, screams still swept through Kadyne. The roads were filled with corpses that could no longer speak. Soldiers, women and children. Had it have been the work of demons, one could only tremble at the sight of such a scene. But now Orba knew. This wasn't the doing of unfathomable monsters but was the result of living humans swinging their swords.

Hoh.

Looking up at the sky, his eyes widened slightly. The black dragon was flying in the air. But looking at it once more after having concluded that it couldn't exist, he guessed that it must be some kind of air carrier. No doubt something that belonged to Garda. It would have been concealed in the outskirts of the town and once the sorcery was put into effect, it carried out an aerial bombing.

To burn to the ground from the sky a territory that should be under one's own control. It was the same thing that Orba had done in Apta.

Stan showed the way as they went. It was unclear how he was sensing ether, but as they advanced further and further, his simple and unaffected face clearly revealed the pain he was in.

“They’re being sucked up,” now and then, he would groan as though in the grip of a feverish nightmare. “The ether and the hearts of the dead are being sucked up.”

Evading the enemy’s sight, grieving bitterly as they abandoned the hunted populace, the destination they eventually arrived at was the temple of the Dragon Gods faith that was near the castle buildings. *I see*, thought Orba as he ran. It was a fitting place for the enemy leader to be.

“Wait,” unsurprisingly, Stan’s utterly exhausted frame sank down beside the staircase leading to the temple.

Orba firmly grasped the hilt of his sword and rushed in. He expected that there might be a large number of Garda’s troops, but instead, the inside was deserted and there was no sign of life. As he went further in, the staircase sloped downwards and across from it a hall lined with columns came into view.

A single man was inside. The hooded figure wore long robes and in his hand he brandished a staff. Encrusted within it was a jewel sparkling with the seven colours of the rainbow which was emitting some kind of wave. Although it was invisible to the eye, and although he couldn’t sense it as well as Stan could, *that* was undoubtedly ether.

Killing his presence and stifling his breathing, Orba slowly and quietly stepped out from the shadow of the columns. Suddenly, without warning, the man turned around. Orba was prepared for that too and ran down the hall with his sword in one hand.

“Are you Garda?”

“Am I Garda?” The man who seemed like a sorcerer laughed in a hoarse voice that sounded as though his throat had been crushed. “In a sense, you poke at the true nature of things. Masked boy. But the likes of I am merely a passageway chosen by Lord Garda.”

“A passageway,” Orba parroted his words but in any case, he had no understanding of sorcery. “At any rate, if I kill you, it looks like this senseless bloodshed will end.”

“I congratulate you for having made it here. But that is all.”

As soon as he had finished speaking, the sorcerer took a leather bag that was tied at his waist and threw it towards Orba. As soon as it hit the ground, it gave off light and exploded. Orba had been about to cut him down but stepped back and instinctively shielded his face.

Thereupon, holding out his staff as though taking a stance with a sword, the sorcerer lunged at Orba. The distance between them was considerable. It shouldn’t have been able to reach him but it extended like a whip and coiled around Orba’s right arm.

“What!”

Just as he felt its cold touch on his skin, the staff effected a horrifying transformation. Before he realised what was happening, it had turned into a snake. Twisting its body that was speckled with black spots, it tried to sink its fangs into the nape of Orba’s neck. Orba frantically tried to bend his neck backwards out of reach but even as he was doing so, the snake coiled itself round repeatedly and slithered upwards. The part that corresponded to its tail stretched out an unnatural length, its tip clasped in the sorcerer’s hand.

“Kill him,” the sorcerer ordered, his voice filled with mocking scorn.

He was not talking to the snake he was using. A soldier clad entirely in black equipment stepped out from the other side of the shadows within the temple. It seemed that a single guard had been allotted to the sorcerer.

He held an axe in one hand and approached at a leisurely pace. As Orba’s right arm was blocked by the snake, he couldn’t use his sword to fight against him.

Breathing harshly while desperately turning his face away from the snake that was even now aiming for his neck, Orba tried to step back. But the sorcerer who was clutching the snake’s tail stood firm with unexpected strength and wouldn’t allow him to retreat.

The figure of the soldier approached to within striking distance. Behind the mask, Orba’s eyes glittered with impatience.

He seemed to try once more to retreat but instead staggered forward from the recoil and ended up in a posture that was all but presenting his neck to the enemy.

The enemy raised his axe and a wind signifying death rose before Orba to envelop him.

But this time, Orba hadn’t staggered but had stepped forward of his own accord. He had moved forward so as to create a range in which he could fall back and at the same time that the axe was about to strike, he retreated half a step backwards and lifted up his right arm.

Blood did not spill.

The head of the snake was struck off by the axe and it turned into the staff, whose two pieces were sent flying. At the same time, Orba smashed the soldier’s kneecap with his sword and as he sank to his knees groaning, he lost no time in swooping in to strike twice at his head.

Jumping over the soldier who was in his death throes, Orba advanced towards the sorcerer. Under the hood, his face showed an expression of astonishment. But he didn’t give up on victory and once again made as if to grope for something at his waist.

In that instant, Orba threw his sword with all his strength.

Struck unexpectedly, the sorcerer wasn’t able to dodge and could only yield as the steel tip penetrated his chest.

Part 3

“Raswan Bazgan!”

A shaking voice reverberated around the audience chamber. In the hall, movement stopped with swords and spears still interlocked and a new wind blew with that person’s entrance. Toún and Raswan Bazgan, father and son, turned towards the same direction. A scornful smile appeared on Raswan’s face. “Well, well.”

“Father!”

When the new arrival – Bouwen Tedos – saw Archduke Hirgo’s form lying in a pool of blood, his steps faltered for a moment. Bouwen was the son of one of the elite guards to the royal family but his father had died in battle when he was twelve years old. Recognising his quick wits, Archduke Hirgo has adopted him as a son shortly afterwards.

Having lost his second father, intense anger appeared in Bouwen’s face. He strode forward, forcefully pushing aside Toún’s subordinates. Normally he was a young man who loved flowers and birds, and now the figure of his manifested anger was so terrifying that Raswan's soldiers could not easily draw near him, even with his sword sheathed.

“It’s fine. Let him pass” as he spoke, Raswan unsheathed his own sword. “You have good reason to attack me. Like I have good reason for driving out my uncle and taking the throne. Once I become king, I will not be able to put my own affairs first. I’ll gladly take your heart.”

“You’ll have to rip it out, rebel.”

Bouwen’s face was suffused with blood but underneath it was still pale and he should have been resting in bed. In the battle at the Coldrin Hills, his shoulder had been smashed and he had taken bullets to the back. He had recovered considerably in the last month, but not to the point where he could wield a sword.

But Bouwen was unflinching as he stepped up to the centre of the hall to confront Raswan.

The two of them were often compared to one another. Not only were they close in age and of similar physique, they were alike in their knowledge of the martial arts and alike too in being quick-tempered, and time and time again, their names had come up as candidates for the succession. Although to be precise, that was the word on the street and Ax himself had never once alluded to it.

However, perhaps because that mood transmitted itself to them, it couldn’t be said that

Bouwen and Raswan were habitually close. They never even spoke familiarly with each other.

If they fought head on, who would come out on top? Despite the current situation, their duel was attracting an interest that was much like curiosity.

The two of them slowly started to measure their distance. A number of eyes followed both their movements.

The first to move was Raswan. Propelling himself with his left foot, he jabbed at Bouwen's throat. Bouwen repelled it, twisted left and hit back from the side.

After that, it turned into a battle of attack and defence that no one could take their eyes off. From across a fixed distance and while drawing a circle to the right, the two of them swung their swords as though they were mowing down large trees.

The people watching didn't make a sound.

Their skill seemed roughly the same. But as their swords clashed five, six times – as was to be expected, Bouwen's stance began to slip. It wasn't only the soldiers who were watching but also Bouwen himself who felt that from there on he would only be able to push forward with brute force. For that reason, he lunged forward in a single, desperate blow. At the risk of getting injured, he closed the distance between them with reckless force. Right as Raswan performed a feint and was about to begin his next assault, he thrust at Raswan and miraculously slipped under his guard unharmed. Sword against sword, their guards locked together.

The force of the attack took Raswan by surprise. His footwork was thrown out of step. Bouwen applied his body weight and was about knock down the treacherous retainer.

"That's as far as you go!"

The soldiers on Raswan's side had been too caught up in the duel and had for a moment neglected to pay attention to themselves, allowing Toún Bazgan to make his move. But perhaps it was also because he didn't want to see his son pierced by sword in front of his own eyes. Toún hurled himself at the nearby soldiers and cut across the hall, breaking into a run as he aimed at Raswan.

But it backfired. When he saw right in front of him the father of the man he was about to strike down, despite the murder of his own adoptive father, for an instant, Bouwen's fervour weakened.

Taking advantage of that, Raswan swept at his opponent's legs. As Bouwen pitched forward, the sword fell from his hand.

At the same moment, Raswan's soldiers stopped Toún's charge and pinioned his arms behind his back.

"It's over," Raswan smiled coldly. Bouwen was not moving from where he had fallen.

Having gotten to this point, the soldiers on both sides were suddenly seething murderously. It was looking more and more like Taúlia would be the scene of a fight in which blood would be washed for blood. At that moment,

"Please wait."

Once more, someone had appeared in the hall.

Had it have been anyone else, they would not have been able to halt the surge of bloodlust within the room or caused everyone to look their way.

Had it not have been Ax Bazgan's only daughter, Esmena Bazgan.

Everyone stared at her half dumbfounded. They understood that she must have come to the audience chamber through the passageway that led to the inner quarters. They understood it, but no one had expected that the usually gentle princess who wouldn't so much as kill an insect would step alone and with her head held high into a hall where swords and spears glistened.

"Princess," Toún's subordinates called out.

"Please withdraw, Princess!" Raswan's soldiers cried out as though entreating her. They had to drive Ax from the throne for having lost the sovereign's seal and for having allied himself with Mephius, but even so, they felt neither hostility nor hatred towards his daughter. Rather, once Raswan was joined with Esmena in marriage, the inherited blood of the Bazgan House that once established Zer Tauran would run even thicker.

Trembling faintly, her wide-open eyes brimming with tears, Esmena ignored the soldiers on either side of her and looked straight at Raswan, as though their gazes were tied together with a string.

Who there could have known?

Back when Mephius and Garbera had concluded peace. At that time, Ryucown, a treacherous vassal who spoke out about his dissatisfaction, and his followers occupied Zaim Fortress. And Princess Vileena of Garbera had turned an inflexible gaze at Ryucown even as his soldiers pleaded with her.

Naturally he couldn't know that this was a repeat of that situation and for a moment,

Raswan's face turned unpleasant. However, he immediately mended his expression.

"This is not a scene in which a princess should take the stage. This is a matter for a man who grieves for his country and who will stand to shoulder the responsibility of that country. Nor will your mother be harmed. Withdraw," he ordered. Bouwen lay at his feet. Raswan's sword was at his neck.

When she saw it, Esmena's face turned even paler. She was a girl who had always kept away from quarrels and fights. Exposed to the bloodlust that had spread throughout the room, it would not have been surprising if she lost consciousness and collapsed.

"The one to withdraw will be you, Raswan Bazgan," cried Esmena, lifting the corner of her eyes in an expression unlike her usual one.

"What are you saying?"

"Y-You are not qualified and dishonour the throne that legitimately belongs to the ruler, Ax Bazgan. Sheathe your sword immediately and leave."

"What could you understand about government? Ax Bazgan has already lost the right to a legitimate claim over Zer Tauran. I did not take action because I coveted the throne. As proof of that, I would not immediately designate myself governor-general of Taúlia. I will personally take back the mark of being Zer Tauran's king."

"The mark?"

"Indeed, Princess."

Raswan smiled, having regained his composure. He had certainly been startled when Esmena had appeared but after all, compared to the grimly resolved man in the prime of his youth that he was, she was just a young girl ignorant of the world. There was nothing she could do.

"Ax foolishly let himself be robbed of it by our old enemy, Mephius. Then without even regaining it, he bound himself into an alliance with them. If that isn't a betrayal towards not only of Taúlians but also all Zerdians, then what is?"

Armed as he was, Raswan looked every inch the young warrior. His features were well-ordered, his physique was also good and above all, he had a vigour that burst from him and overwhelmed his surroundings. It was no wonder that the soldiers who had pledged their loyalty to Ax were shaken.

Now that Bouwen had fallen and that Toún was being prevented from moving, the only one confronting Raswan was a single princess. He smiled contemptuously.

“I do not like blood. You should understand, Princess, the anguish it caused me to rise to action despite that. Once Ax has been expulsed, I intend to gather the entire army and attack Mephius,” he fired that remark.

There is such a thing as momentum. When big changes are about to occur, those who ride that momentum as though riding a wind blowing hard from the bottom of a gorge manifest a power that would normally be unthinkable, and give off a supernatural charm, almost as though they had been chosen by the gods. Right then, Raswan was displaying that pattern.

“This is as it were a holy war for all Zerdians. With these two hands, I will without fail reclaim the sovereign’s seal of the ancient Magic Dynasty and…”

“The sovereign’s seal of the ancient Magic Dynasty,” Esmena spoke up, interrupting him. Raswan drew his eyebrows together unpleasantly.

“So talkative.”

“Raswan, that seal,” Esmena took out the cloth-covered parcel that she held to her side and unwrapped it with one hand. “Is this it?”

For a moment, Raswan felt dizzy from shock and voices rose in confusion from the soldiers who were watching the development from behind Esmena. In her hand, she unmistakably held the war fan shaped like a dragon’s head that Ax always carried with him. As though it were shining with a clear and colourless light, a great number of people narrowed their eyes as though dazzled by its radiance illuminating their faces.

Only Raswan, his expression transformed, pointed at it. “I-It’s a fake,” he decreed. “It can’t be here. Ax took a fake fan to the battlefield. There’s nothing strange about that being another one!”

Esmena wordlessly took the fan in her hand. The grip was a bit wider than was usual. The reason for that was demonstrated by Esmena herself. She removed the bottom part of the grip to reveal a rectangular crystal. Within it, something could be seen to be glittering. It was the sovereign’s seal of the ancient Magic Dynasty, said to have been made from a fragment of a claw of a Dragon God.

Everyone in the hall held their breath.

“Impossible,” one of the soldier’s from Raswan’s group groaned. The muscles of his face were quivering violently. “Lord Raswan, what is this? Wasn’t the sovereign’s seal stolen by Mephius?”

“Don’t be fooled!” Raswan screamed, clearly unable to maintain his usual state of mind. He thrust out his finger. “T-That’s also a fake. Esmena, hand it over. It’s said that nothing in this world can damage the Dragon God’s claw. I’ll destroy it with my own hands.”

No sooner had he spoken than he was about to approach Esmena. But at that crucial moment, she mustered all of her strength to glare at Raswan.

“The sovereign’s seal of the ancient Magic Dynasty which is in the custody of the Bazgan House to which I belong. It was you yourself who said that it is the mark of the ruler of Zer Tauran. You who called it a fake and who was going to destroy it with your sword, does that not make you the enemy of all Zerdians? Everyone! Seize this fool.”

Raswan was beyond listening and was about to grab hold of Esmena. But instead, his own shoulder was caught from behind. Bouwen had risen with the speed of a tempest.

“Let go!”

As he struggled, the sword fell from Raswan’s hand. Seizing the opportunity, the soldiers made their move. The weapons carried by Raswan’s soldiers all sprang into action and there too fighting broke out. The soldiers who had risen in rebellion had clearly lost their fervour. Judging Ax to be cowardly, they had followed Raswan but that was because they were proud of their history and lineage as Zerdians.

It could be said that their defeat was determined the moment that none other than Raswan has been about to trample that pride underfoot. Among them, there were some who let go of their spears of their own accord.

Unable to comprehend the entire situation, Esmena was swaying where she stood and was on the verge of collapse. Esmena had a delicate and sensitive personality, and her body and mind had already been pushed to their limit. Somebody was supporting the princess’ shoulders.

“Princess, it’s dangerous. This way.”

Esmena was already more than half unconscious. A soldier clad in the armour of Toún’s troops held her by the shoulder to help her from falling and Esmena unresistingly followed him out of the hall.

The fighting in Taúlia's audience chamber did not last for long. More than half of Raswan's soldiers had lost their fighting spirit and fell to their knees; the remainder lost their lives. Raswan himself was captured by Bouwen and soldiers who had come as reinforcement.

"The princess?" Once he judged that the situation had been settled, Bouwen looked up.

"A while ago I noticed one of the troops leading her out but…"

"Is that right," answered Bouwen, his face somewhat pale as the wounds in his back had reopened. He was overwrought after just losing his adoptive father then having barely been able to protect someone important to him, and so was surely feeling relieved. Thus he couldn't realise.

As the battle in the hall was about to come to an end, the soldier who was with Esmena did not lead her to the detached living quarters but to a castle courtyard. For some reason, he waved his arms a few times in a movement that looked like he was dancing and a black airship unexpectedly materialised. It didn't look as though it had simply been camouflaged and hidden beforehand and there was probably no one in Taúlia who would be able to understand how it came to be there.

The soldier slowly removed his helmet. Although his face had been youthful when he had called out to Esmena, now it was that of an elderly man. His breaths sounded like a snake slithering through the desert as he carried the swooning Esmena to sit in the airship's seat. Taking off with a sound like claws on metal, the craft rose into the dark blue sky at a speed beyond what anyone in Tauran would ever have seen and disappeared into the western skies.

Meanwhile, Moldorf was stationed in Eimen. The enemy was steadily approaching. Within a few days, the army led by Ax would be planting their flags in Eimen's territory. If they broke through this city, Garda would be in danger. Even so, they received the same orders as ever and Garda himself had not left Zer Illias. They had stationed the troops and after that,

"Do not block the enemy's advance on Eimen," was the sorcerer's only order and he brooked no answer.

That was their usual way of doing things but what was even more incomprehensible was the report that his younger brother Nilgif's troops would leave Kadyne. Since an enemy detached force was said to be nearing the city, they should be departing soon.

"What are they planning?"

Even if he asked, the sorcerers would give no answer.

If they were going to concentrate their military forces in Eimen, shouldn't they have done so from the start? Tilting his thick neck, Moldorf nevertheless did what he had done until then and focused on things he could actually do. Once the troops from Kadyne, which included his brother, joined them, they would have to reorganise their battle formation.

What a headache-inducing job this is, his lips twisted as he spread out a map of Eimen's surroundings. How was he supposed to go and inspire his men and his companions to fight a battle that he himself had no enthusiasm for?

Moldorf felt that at times like this, he wanted a drink. But because so many soldiers had been allotted to Eimen, the rations distributed were decreasing day-by-day. There was no longer any alcohol to be had.

If this goes on and food runs out, the soldiers won't keep their sanity.

Resigned to the situation with the hostages and with his native city, what would see him launch the beacon of insurrection was remarkably down-to-earth: Moldorf was irritated that there was no alcohol. Gulping it down every night as though to drown in it was the custom – or better said, as far as Moldorf was concerned, it was a completely natural desire dictated by instinct in almost the same way as eating a meal or sleeping.

Alcohol, huh?

Yet even Moldorf had once stayed away from drink.

From the window of square, stone-built building, Moldorf looked up at the cloudy sky.

In Tauran were powers were constantly vying for supremacy, there had always existed a relationship between the three countries of Lakekish, Fugrum and Kadyne. At the western edge of Tauran, Lakekish had a fortress to defend against raids by the nomadic tribes of the western desert. Therefore, whenever the situation in the desert looked dangerous, those three countries would often form a cooperative alliance. At those times, it was a long-standing tradition that each of the countries would, for a short period, leave a son or daughter of the nobility in the custody of the others as a pledge.

Three years ago, a young prince of Lakekish was sent to Kadyne. His name was Yākin and he was seventeen years old. This was an exceptional case since those sent as pledges were often young children whose age was in the single digits. As in those days Kadyne's princess Lima was fifteen, they were close in age. There was some thought of receiving him as a kinsman if the alliance were prolonged.

Going by appearances, Yākin was a fine figure of a man but one didn't feel from him the ambition of a Zerdian warrior. Already from that alone, Moldorf and those like him unilaterally decided that he was worthless as a man and on top of that, after arriving in

Kadyne, Yākin rarely left the living quarters that had been assigned to him. Even when the king himself planned to hold a banquet for his welcome, he turned it down on the grounds of poor physical health.

Does he see us as enemies? It truly felt as though he was treating Kadyne with contempt and among the military men, Moldorf included, the antipathy towards Yākin grew stronger.

Sensing their mood, Lima Khadein chided Moldorf and the others.

“He is just shy. Why are you gentlemen immediately being so impatient?”

Even though she was a daughter of the royal family, she was a woman who noticed these small things between men. When the princess told them that, Moldorf and his companions couldn’t do anything other than take it into account but, after all, Princess Lima was still but a young girl. The question of whether there was something that interested Yākin was of no concern to the Kadyne warriors.

And like that, two months had passed since Yākin’s arrival. When the annual festival was to be held, this time, Lima organised it. Partly because she had always been attentive towards him, the prince from Lakekish seemed unable to refuse her invitation and had for the first time shown up to take his seat.

It was fine that he had put in an appearance but Yākin was as lacking in liveliness as he ever was. Continually downing his drinks, Moldorf watched him in irritation until, less than two hours after the start of the banquet, Yākin seemed about to excuse himself from the table. It looked to Moldorf like he was spitting on Princess Lima’s solicitude and, flying into a rage, and, before he even realised what he was doing, he had violently shoved Yākin’s thin chest. The prince had fallen backwards, taking a number of tables with him, and was bleeding slightly from the head.

Using violence against royalty from another country should of course have been treated as a serious crime. The ones who saved him by speaking up for him to the king were Lima and Yākin.

Speaking with him afterwards, he realised that Yākin actually did have a frail constitution and that even when he was in Lakekish he had rarely been able to go out.

“Because of this body, I am treated like a parasite within my own country,” the smile he gave was certainly meek but it was also somehow dazzling. It was easy to guess why, despite there being a younger brother, the eldest son himself had been sent as hostage.

From beginning to end, Moldorf’s huge body was hunched in on itself and his head was lowered.

“Moldorf, please stop.” He had done the same before Princess Lima and because he had been excessively prostrating himself, she had burst into laughter. “If a hero such as yourself stays like that, the people around us will wonder what kind of a monster of a princess I am. My chances at getting married will be pushed back because of it.”

Her flower-like smile had seemed to melt into Moldorf’s breast.

From that day onwards, Moldorf decided not to touch alcohol again. He had intended to be firm in his resolve but, in the end, he didn’t even last half a year. The reason being that Nilgif would drink with great relish and ostentation right in front of him. Eventually, the brothers got into a fight over it.

Seized by a strange feeling of nostalgia, Moldorf was about to break into a smile when his expression suddenly turned serious again.

Princess Lima.

It was impossible for him to believe that the princess had betrayed the country. No, even if it were true, it was all because of the strange magic arts Garda had at his command. Apart from Lima, Kadyne’s royal family had been annihilated. On top of having a duty to protect her, Moldorf was indebted to the princess for having saved his life.

I will save you without fail. So Moldorf vowed to himself time and time again.

“Show true loyalty, Moldorf.”

When those words suddenly came to mind, Moldorf’s expression turned bitter. It was nothing more than bullshit from a brat who didn’t know the circumstances. And yet, why was it that it wouldn’t stop echoing deep inside his ears like this?

If she saw me now, would the princess scold me? Like she did that time, that thought welled up within him.

…And then, when the enemy was finally drawing near, the report came that the troops led by Nilgif had entered Eimen’s territory.

As he was preparing to go out and greet his little brother, Moldorf received fresh news. The information came from a scouting unit from Fugrum that had taken position in the mountains south of Eimen and that had been assigned to survey their surroundings. Moldorf thought it was suspicious how the messenger seemed hesitant to give the report, but he soon understood the reason why.

“With that, I have given my report,” he then left as though fleeing.

Moldorf stood there for a long time, completely still. He didn't know how or what to think. A fierce rage that seemed to grill his body and a feeling of despair that made him just want to sit down and give everything up brushed against the surface of his heart.

At long last –

Moldorf abruptly raised his head.

I need to hurry.

His younger brother would receive the same report. In which case, he needed to hurry to him immediately. Because he was afraid that everything they had endured until that day would all be for nothing.

Chapter 6: Final Battle

Part 1

The sorcerer had fallen forward and didn't move. While gasping for breath, treading as cautiously as a cat, Orba slowly approached the corpse.

He could certainly picture the sorcerer having two or three hearts and suddenly reviving to bare his fangs. But it looked like a normal corpse. The remains of the broken staff were scattered about and there was no sign of the snake that had threatened Orba.

The man had called himself "a passageway for Garda". Of course, he didn't understand what that meant but in all likelihood, he wasn't Garda himself.

Orba pulled the sword from the corpse's chest then, perhaps thinking of something, knelt by it with his longsword still in hand.

When he left the temple a few minutes later, he found Stan waiting with some horses. Colour had returned to his face. As Orba had guessed, the sorcery's trickery seemed to no longer be in effect now that the sorcerer had been killed. The soldiers in the street wore the same expressions on their faces as though they had suddenly been awakened from sleep.

But being pulled from the illusions did not dispel the panic. The air carrier – Orba could now clearly see that it was no dragon but an aircraft with ether engines – was still in the sky. Every time it dropped bombs, a white light illuminated his face and houses went up in flames.

For the people rushing to escape, it felt as though even though they had opened their eyes, they were still caught in a nightmare. A great many were running without being able to tell if this was a dream or reality.

Orba and Stan leapt onto horses and galloped down the street. There was a ground-shaking thud and the buildings they had passed exploded and scattered into debris. Flames and smoke mingled together and filled the sky over Kadyne.

Within the sounds of explosions, screams and roars that almost seemed to have taken over their ears, they heard Shique calling shrilly.

“Orba!”

Each and every one from Orba’s unit was gathered by the city’s southern gate. None of them had any conspicuous injuries. It was fortunate that their entrance into the town had been delayed.

“What the hell happened?” Gilliam’s face was a mixture of irritation and anger.

“Instead of all hanging around squawking like new-born dragons, why aren’t you going to fight?” Orba gave them a brief explanation of the situation. When he told them about killing the sorcerer at the temple, Talcott shrank back with a start.

“Ugh, scary. You might have been cursed for all time.” Being a former sailor, he was superstitious. His fingers drew some kind of charm to ward off evil.

“Anyway, we’ll be the ones who will cut Garda down. There’s nothing scary about being cursed by one or two sorcerers,” Kurun puffed out his chest. The inexperienced recruit was unexpectedly bold.

Orba watched as each of their faces returned to their usual expression. “From here on, this is our counterattack,” he said.

First, he left upwards of thirty mercenaries with Gilliam to mop up the enemy soldiers. As for the rest, “We’re taking that down,” he said as he pointed towards the sky.

Similarly to Shique and the others who had, by a stroke of good luck, been near the end of the line, the slow-moving artillery had also been nearby. The guns they had to hand included five cannons taken from the enemy. Orba decided that it would more or less be enough.

As for Orba himself, his intention was to rally assistance so as soon as he had given instructions to immediately assemble the guns outside the city, he promptly jumped back on a horse. He called out to each of the soldiers who were wandering aimlessly outside the town walls. Since both units and personnel were scattered, the chain of command had completely broken down. There were a lot of soldiers who had already fled from the town.

The ground shook once more and small stones struck Orba’s mask. He clicked his tongue inwardly. He couldn’t stand Surūr but the troop of warriors from different countries that the man had brought together, apart for Orba’s unit, should not have disintegrated into chaos. But this,

A single sorcerer can cause this much mayhem?

There was neither policy nor plan for something like this.

Just managing to collect a good number of people, Orba gathered them all where the roads intersected at the centre of the city. While they were cantering along, he drew a simple copy of the city map that he had memorised and wrote down where to place the guns.

“Don’t all fire at once. I’ll send a signal. You absolutely must fire following that order.”

Among those he gave instructions to were many Helian soldiers who had fought alongside Orba’s unit at the relay-station town. Of the Zerdians other than them, there were not a few who displayed reluctance towards receiving his peremptory orders but,

“We will act as decoys.”

They weren’t able to voice any complaints as a small group of riders led by Orba rode their horses to a position where they would attract the enemy ship’s notice.

Explosions erupted fast and furious just behind where Orba and his group galloped by. Despite it being his first time in the town, Orba, who was in the lead, chose the way with precision, but one of the mercenaries at the end of the line was struck by the shock of an impact and fell. He broke his neck and died.

Before long, they had done almost a full round of the downtown area and had arrived at a square with a park when, from atop his horse, Orba suddenly raised his arm.

The sound of cannons echoed like a roar.

One or two shots missed but it still served as a threat that guided how the enemy ship moved. It turned in the sky to put itself at a distance from the shelling. At that moment, the air carrier’s movements slowed.

“Fire!”

At Orba’s command, this time a volley of fire came from the surface. The ship’s large frame was seen to shake, flames spouted from the underside and it immediately listed then fell.

Shouts of joy rose from the streets of Kadyne.

Looking at it again, the city was now overtaken by flames and soot, and countless corpses concealed the roads from sight. Many of the populace had been killed and most of those who were still alive were standing in a daze, were grieving over the bodies of their family and friends, or were clinging to each other, simply crying.

A particularly high-pitched voice reached Orba’s ears. Looking to his side, a young woman was clawing at the surface of the road. Listening to her sorrowing words, it seemed that she had lost her new-born baby.

Orba tightly shut his lips and let his horse canter once more.

The old trees planted in a row along the outer walls were engulfed in flames and sparks repeatedly flew overhead. He searched for the figure of the commanding officer, Surūr, but what he found was a group of soldiers who were carrying his corpse on their shoulders.

A man not blessed by the fortunes of war.

If instead of being the commander of an entire army, he had simply lead a battalion into battle, he might have been a man who would have earned greater achievements. Orba sighed, his thoughts gloomy.

“Orba-dono,” Bisham, the company commander hailed him. As a sensible, quick-witted man of action, even in these abnormal circumstances, he tried as much as possible to remain calm and gather the soldiers in one place.

“It seems that Garda uses sorcery to throw people’s hearts into disorder.” His voice was shaking slightly. He had wounds to his arms and legs, telling of how he too had fought the demons.

Orba nodded. “Yeah. But even sorcerers die if they’re cut down.”

This truth that Orba had made apparent was virtually the one ray of hope for the Zerdians who had suffered the bitter experience of seeing half their unit destroyed. They had been told the legend of Garda in place of lullabies. In the real world, in the short time since Garda had revived, he had taken control of nearly half of the Tauran region. They didn’t know his true essence, they couldn’t seize his true shape, they didn’t even understand his true objective.

Although they had triumphed in Cherik, there were those among them who doubted whether he was an opponent that swords and spears could reach. Just a short while ago, they had felt for themselves the terror of sorcery. But Orba had killed it. If you pierced them with a sword, their lives were severed and the effects of sorcery would cease.

But,

“That’s also a trap. It’s all a trap!” There were those who screamed, half-crazed. They pointed towards Orba. “Why were you the only one to stay conscious? You accursed Mephian gladiator, everything, it’s all a trap. You’ll deceive us and drag us into a hell worse than this!”

Perhaps because sorcery had shaken their hearts, there were not a few voices raised in agreement. The air around them was once more becoming laden with nervous tension. Bisham was about to regain control of the situation but this time, it was Orba who forcefully pushed the company commander aside and stepped forward.

“Yeah, these gladiators.”

“What?”

“They’re treated like cattle. They fight anyone they’re ordered to, that’s what gladiators are.”

“T-That’s…” For some reason, the soldier couldn’t continue. Orba increased his pace and was already within a stone’s throw of him. His hand quickly reached out to stay the spear that the soldier had instinctively raised.

“To amuse the people, be it their parents, their brothers or the son of their own blood, they have to take their sword and kill each other. That is what us gladiators are. But we don’t get deceived by illusions. Because we don’t have nightmares. Since actually, every day of our lives was a nightmare.”

What Orba was saying was complete nonsense. He himself had almost been killed by the illusion of demons after all. But in this situation, the truth didn’t matter. Although Zerdians loathed Mephians, in this critical situation, would the powerful feeling of camaraderie that came from coming back from the brink of death together overcome that hatred?

Two or three lies at this point in time… Hadn’t his life been coated in lies when he was in Mephius itself, Orba thought self-mockingly.

When he was a hair’s breadth from the tip of the spear, he suddenly and forcefully drew it towards himself. To the soldier’s confusion, the spearhead seemed in an instant to be biting into Orba’s neck.

“W-What are you doing?”

“Don’t you want to test it?”

“Test?”

“Whether or not I’m the sorcerer’s comrade. The sorcerer I cut down bled red blood but you probably won’t believe that. What colour blood does a sorcerer spill in your imagination? Do you want to test it out on my body?”

Orba was going to draw the spear even closer to him but the soldier resisted unconsciously. From the other side of the mask, those unblinking eyes stared straight at the soldier’s face. He gulped.

Gilliam was about to step forward to put a stop to Orba’s insane behaviour. A hand stretched out before him. Shique’s.

Why are you getting in the way? The glare that Gilliam threw at Shique abruptly lost its intensity. Shique was staring only at Orba. His expression showed far more strongly than Gilliam's that he was on edge and that any moment now he might take out his swords and strike down the soldier.

Orba and the soldier continued their silent confrontation. As the Zerdians watched, holding their breath, a loud voice was heard.

"What are you doing!"

Feeling as though they had just had insults hurled at them, the startled soldiers turned around and saw a middle-aged woman leaning on the back of the young mother that Orba had observed a short while ago.

She was still clawing at the surface of the road. Her broken nails had drawn a trail of blood along the ground. She had cried until her voice had died out and only groans as hoarse as a man's now escaped from her cracked and parched lips.

As for the middle-aged woman who was trying to stop her, her clothes were burned to tatters. One of her breasts was all but exposed. When they were out walking in the streets, Zerdian women showed almost no skin. But right then, that custom had no significance. As the soot blackening her cheeks was washed away by her own tears streaming endlessly down, she held the young mother close and stroked her back, desperately trying to encourage her. "It's alright, it's alright," she repeated those and other such empty and meaningless words.

As the hot wind struck his nostrils, Orba let go of the spear.

"I'm going to Eimen." His voice wasn't particularly loud but it reached the ears of every one of the soldiers gathered there. "I'm not afraid of Garda. I'm not terrified of sorcery either. During the march, what I probably need to look out for won't be Garda's clever magical traps but you bastards getting my way of killing him and turning your swords against me."

As soon as he finished saying so, Orba jumped nimbly onto the back of a horse.

"Shique, Gilliam! Everyone in my unit, follow me. I'll defeat Garda myself long before any Zerdian can!"

"Yeah!" The mercenaries raised their fists in the air and shouted in unison. Most of them were genuinely moved by Orba's words and attitude, but Talcott was rueful about letting himself get carried away and his face was red as he raised his fist.

"Hah, that brat," even as he railed against him, Gilliam also quickly chose a horse and put his foot in the stirrup. He turned his eyes towards Shique, who was likewise making his way to a horse. "What is it, Shique?"

The reason he asked was because although he had expected him to look thoroughly satisfied, he was staring at Orba with a somewhat forlorn expression. Shique softly shook his head.

“Nothing,” he answered then muttered in a low voice, *No matter where he is and even if he himself wanted to live peacefully, he surely…*

“What?”

“I said it was nothing.”

As though to shake off his sentimentalism, Shique vigorously leaped on his horse and immediately set off at a gallop, hurrying after Orba’s back.

“After them, after them!” From the ground, Bisham waived his arm to rouse the soldiers to action. “We’re going to fall behind the Mephians. The ones to defeat the sorcerer and take back Tauran with our swords should be none other than we Zerdians!”

To compete with those who had left, the Zerdians did as they had and caught the warhorses that were running wildly through the smouldering streets of Kadyne. Terrified by the fire, the horses were neighing madly and had to be brought under control with equal ferociousness before the soldiers could start to head north from Kadyne.

Orba only looked back once to check that the Zerdian soldiers were rushing after them.

Can we really not use dragons? Horses were one thing but any dragons had probably long since broken through the walls of Kadyne and scattered outside. Even if they hadn’t, carelessly approaching a raging dragon would only infuriate it further and might endanger the lives of those of the city’s people who had survived.

If only Hou Ran were here… That thought fleeted across his mind. Be it a war of capture or a battle beginning with a charge, even a single dragon was preferable to none. But right now, they had to settle for the fact that the entire troop hadn’t been annihilated.

Sorcery…

He ground his teeth fiercely and turned to face the oncoming wind. As long as he had steel at his waist and a heartbeat in his chest, defeat was impossible. Orba grappled with the stormy feelings that raged within him by forcing himself to believe that.

Orba guided the troops himself, choosing not the highway but a road that cut through the mountains that spread to the north of Kadyne. He had crammed into his head the maps of the surrounding area for just such an occasion. When the sun went down, they were able to set up

an encampment on an even piece of land at the foot of the mountains.

Orba had decided to follow a narrow path that ran at the top of a gorge. A river that flowed into Kadyne's wetlands had once run through the bottom of the valley but its course had been altered to irrigate Zer Tauran's pastures and now the gorge had now dried up.

Prudence was essential for passing along this narrow path. Marching at night would be even more dangerous. Orba had a watch set up and decided to make camp overnight. It was impossible for him not to feel impatient. But no matter how quickly they hurried, it would take them upwards of a full day to reach Eimen.

When they bivouacked for the evening, Orba asked Bisham to get the platoon leaders to do roll-call and to verify their numbers. The army stood at about four hundred. The rest had either been killed in action in Kadyne or had forgotten themselves because of the sorcerer's trap and had fled.

Since they hadn't brought any non-combatants, they could of course afford to march for extended periods of time. If they couldn't receive supplies at Eimen, their isolated unit would have no choice but to retreat to Cherik. But the enemy might see it as a good opportunity to deal them the finishing blow. The result: annihilation.

"Is this what they call fighting with your back to the wall?"

At Orba's words, Gilliam, who was in the same tent and who had his shoulders turned as though to show how much of hassle it all was, spoke up.

"If you want food to eat and a bed to sleep on then first take over the castle, huh. Heh, plain and simple like that is good enough for me. Better than sorcery and strategy, anyway."

"That's fine for now."

"What's fine?"

"What you said about eating a meal. Bisham-dono."

"Can I do something for you?"

"Would you pass those words on to the soldiers."

Although when they had left Kadyne, Orba had been of the opinion that he had to rouse and stir up the soldiers, he was wondering if they weren't feeling a bit too encouraged. Hurrying too eagerly would lead to their own ruin. Gilliam's words felt like they would get that excessive vigour to drop.

“Understood, but…” Bisham looked at Orba, smiling somewhat at his surprising request. “Wouldn’t it look just as good if you were the one to tell them?”

“That kind of attitude is a pitch for the commander-in-chief. I’m too young.”

Is that so, Bisham said in a low voice. It would certainly be difficult for a Mephian to lead Zerdians. Still, Bisham longed for a land that was different and in which this boy would distinguish himself ever further.

It’s fine for now. It’s fine but alternatively, it’s dangerous. This man, just like he said himself, he’s too young.

To Bisham’s way of thinking, this man could not be the one to defeat Garda. It had to be a Zerdian. And furthermore, it should be a man who would in the future shoulder the weight of Tauran.

Bisham was the commander of a Helian infantry company. Although he was a capable man, the horizons he saw where by no means wide. That a man such as he should at this time come to think beyond his country’s borders and take the whole Tauran region into account was caused by Garda and by none other than Orba.

Part 2

Led by Ax, an army of over six thousand were marching on Eimen. They advanced smoothly without any attacks from the enemy. They had gone north of Lake Soma, crossed part of the highlands that obstructed the way northward and had passed through the Coldrin Hills while maintaining formation as a single large force.

Ax had arrived at the highway that overlooked Eimen to the west but, his expression as he rode his horse remained sombre.

Are they planning to stall for time now, at the very last moment?

He frequently sent out scouts however the provisions made against that were unusual. To Ax's way of thinking, the enemy would undoubtedly line up their battle formation exclusively along the plain to the east of Eimen.

Since there was currently no trade being carried out and all available manpower in the city was serving as soldiers, the town wouldn't be producing anything. As it had to serve as host to Garda's hugely swollen army, there should not be many provisions left. In which case, Ax judged that the enemy would be averse to a siege war and would launch itself at them.

"Even a sorcerer can't fill the stomach by magic."

Six days after leaving Cherik. The distance remaining to Eimen would be covered in just half a day. Having pitched camp on a plateau, Ax was for now waiting for a move from the enemy and was fretting about whether they should attack in one swoop.

To the north, what had once been the pastures of Zer Tauran stretched out, green and lush.

How did things go in Kadyne?

Jagged mountains towered between these main troops and Kadyne, and as airships and military bases were scarce, there was no time to communicate with the detached force. In any case, the latter had not inherently been asked to capture Kadyne. They only had to keep the enemy troops stationed there in check.

Do we distribute the troops and stir things up in Eimen? Or do we move the air carriers from the base and head to Zer Illias?

Even though he solicited the opinions of the leading officers, they were largely the same as Ax's and the two aforementioned plans were the only ones that came up. The pain of Ravan

Dol’s absence pierced his heart.

However,

The enemy is Garda.

Ax would not underestimate the enemy. Ravan had also hammered the point in repeatedly that it was best to assume that information was being leaked to them.

“We will push forward with the entire army,” he decided. If the plan didn’t succeed, they could always overcome the opposition with numbers and speed. Ax sent a messenger to the air carrier base in the south to have them bring over two ships. He would place five hundred soldiers apiece on board each and intended to use them as a mobile force in case of emergency.

This was the decision made by the leader of the western alliance, Ax. Nor did Lasvius, who was accompanying him, object. Seeing his way of command up close, it appeared to him that the authority of the Bazgan House truly wasn’t something to be taken lightly.

When the air carriers arrived the next day, Ax advanced the camp still further and pressed towards Eimen. They took up position south of the highlands, but as ever there was no sign of enemy movement. Ax prudently sent out a reconnoitring party and investigated whether there was any attempt to circle from their flanks or at their rear, but it ended up being a waste of time.

“In that case, we can’t do anything but go for it.”

Preparing for the assault, Ax ordered the army to take a short respite. It was then that something unusual occurred.

The force that Bisham had been appointed commander-in-chief of was halfway through crossing the rugged mountains. They had gone by way of a path so narrow that even their breathing felt as though it were being constricted and, just when the sun started to go down, the vanguard, led by Orba, finally reached a road that was stable underfoot.

But as they drew closer to Eimen, Stan’s complexion as he rode his horse once more grew bad. No doubt he could feel the flow of ether. Which meant that a trap of sorcery once again lay ahead. Yet Orba deliberately drove his horse forward at a recklessly fast pace. Unlike in Kadyne, Eimen had enemy soldiers.

In which case, in the end they’ll strike using armed force.

As long as he understood that, that his opponents were humans wielding steel, then there were any number of ways to fight them.

Afterwards, he determinedly whipped his horse onwards. He was intent upon joining with Ax's main forces before they fell into whatever trap the enemy had prepared.

Here… Ax must not be defeated, so he thought. Although far from perfect, that the west had somehow united to confront Garda was because that man was there. Basically, the descendants of Yasch Bazgan, the king of Zer Tauran, could be said to be at the root of that consciousness of being fellow countrymen that was peculiar to Zerdians.

Taking Ax as a whole, Orba did not think that he was a perfectly ideal king for the Zerdians. For a start, Orba didn't believe that something like lineage had anything to do with having a talent for politics. But in the utter chaos of this situation, lineage had turned once more into a light. So that the people and the soldiers would turn their gaze in the same direction and embrace the same purpose in their hearts, it was necessary to have a leader acting as a guiding light and for that, blood might sometimes hold the most powerful and eloquent persuasive force – more so than the talents or the splendid speeches that would be handed down to posterity or the many other things that revealed a person's greatness.

There was also the case of Helio's Queen Marilène and Orba, as someone who had gotten involved with the strife within the Tauran region, felt it in his bones.

If it loses Ax, the west will collapse. Even if a new leader emerges, there'll be no point hoping for the same kind of solidarity as now. And in that case, winning against Garda will be impossible.

They were approaching a gently-sloping hilly area from the other side of which they would be able to see Eimen and, just as they were drawing up to it,

"Look!"

Someone pointed to a spot in the sky. In the pale, indigo blue curtain of the sky there was a single point that was coloured an unnatural, dark black.

Everyone on that march could only be reminded of the apparitions in Kadyne.

Orba however sprung forward. His behaviour showed no hesitation and, as though guided by that, the soldiers also spurred their horses on.

Just as it had done in Kadyne, the sky suddenly became overcast. A sand-laden wind blew. At first, Ax wondered if the harbinger of a sandstorm. The wind, that cared not about staying in

one place, blew with even greater force and the clouds covered the sun as though the sky over their heads had been painted black.

The first to signal their unease at this abnormal happening were the dragons. They let out high-pitched howls, frightening the horses. All around, these started raising their forelegs wildly, whinnying all the while and shaking the warriors off.

Ax covered his face with the cloak hanging from his back. That sand-laden wind was that fierce. They had temporarily moved the camp to a safe location and he wondered briefly if he should wait for the weather to recover.

The soldiers who were likewise protecting their faces from the sand all lifted their heads as one. Something could be heard coming from the sky. Ax too strained his ears.

When there was a sound like that of thousands, of tens of thousands of flying insects gathered together, how many people would notice that arrows were about to be shot?

“Scatter, scatter, scatter!”

By the time the platoon leaders shouted out, it was too late. The bodies of several hundred soldiers had been pierced through and they collapsed noisily.

“What!” Without a moment’s delay, Ax pulled out his sword and cut down that arrows aimed at his head that rained incessantly down.

At the same time, the wind suddenly stopped.

Sand coiling into a whirlwind swirled through the empty sky and for a moment created a pale brown veil, but it cleared up before long and the soldiers of the western alliance saw a huge shadow hovering before them. It was as though a pitch black wall were blocking the way to Eimen however,

“Go!”

When a voice was emitted from its centre, the wall undulated, heaved and then spat out a group of horse riders. While Ax remained stunned, the wall itself transformed into an army corps that swooped in to attack.

Part 3

Reizus, the sorcerer who was now called Garda and who was feared throughout the west, left Zer Illias at almost that exact same time.

Reports reached his ears almost simultaneously that in Taúlia, Raswan Bazgan had failed to seize control of the city and that in Kadyne, the sorcerer he had despatched had been felled.

Rather than his ears, it was more accurate to say that he felt it with his body. Garda had selected several among his subordinate sorcerers who had a wavelength similar to his and had deployed them throughout the west. The ancient magic that he had resurrected allowed them to share their five senses over long distances as long as they formed an ether "passageway". Their eyes were Garda's eyes, their ears were Garda's ears and, in a manner of speaking, each of them was Garda. That was how he had become such a threat to the west such a short time.

Because of the missteps in Taúlia and Kadyne, he had of course not been able to make any large-scale preparations in Zer Illias. However, piloting a large airship, he calmly pressed on through the pastures and there was no hint of impatience in his expression.

He flew the distance to Eimen in just half a day. Both the speed and the cruising range were strange/unusual. It appeared that Garda was more or less constantly releasing ether from within himself.

At the same time as he arrived in Eimen, an airship carrying a different sorcerer and coming from the south also landed. This sorcerer brought with him a woman who was in a swoon and, upon giving her into the custody of a comrade, he bowed his head as soon as he was in Garda's presence.

"My deepest apologies."

"It's fine. Your failure is my failure. But don't fret. It's simply the case that as we were not able to take Taúlia, we shall have to annihilate them here. And you were able to safely bring the key for that."

"Aye."

"Die in peace. Garda's magic arts have crossed the span of two hundred years and revived."

As he spoke, Garda approached the kneeling sorcerer. As he told him to "die", it looked like Garda himself was going to perform the deed, but he simply passed by him without doing

anything. Nonetheless, the sorcerer collapsed like rags.

The face that jutted out from under the hood was completely devoid of vitality. There were probably very few people who, at a glance, would be able to tell that he was the very same sorcerer who had stood as close as a shadow to Raswan Bazgan in Taúlia. The flesh had entirely fallen in and it was as though his skin were stretched directly across his skull. Only the sorcerers, Garda first and foremost, knew that this was the price to pay for having covered so great a distance as the one between Taúlia and Eimen at far faster a speed than a horse galloping without rest could ever have done.

The sorcerer had something like a smile on his thin lips and remained unmoving where he had fallen. Without paying it any heed, Garda went down the stairs.

Serving as Eimen's temple to the Dragon Gods, the building he was in was a tall tower. The section above ground was open to ordinary worshippers but none except those of the ecclesiastical class were allowed in the cellars.

A damp wind wafted in the underground. As though it had been burrowed through a single, gigantic rock, there was not a joint to be seen in the walls on either side. Proceeding deeper within, his steps not making any sound, Garda stopped when it opened into a circular room.

When he snapped his fingers, flames appeared at points along the curved wall. The faint light they gave illuminated the person standing in the centre of the hall.

Esmena Bazgan.

"At long last I was able to meet you, princess of the Bazgan House," Garda smiled.

There was no answer. Esmena stood there vacantly, like one who was dreaming while awake. Faced with the fearsome threat to the west, she didn't wail, or break down or display anger.

It was not only Esmena. Under the burning flames along the circular wall, noblewomen who had been kidnapped from many of the countries of Tauran were lined up. Among them was Lima Khadein. All were like Esmena: while their hollow gaze wandered around, they simply tottered and swayed like flowers in the wind, neither saying a word nor trying to escape from there.

"It is most fortunate to be able to receive the sovereign's seal of the Magic Dynasty that I had been searching for. Though I don't intend to use it to formally declare myself king of the western lands." The war fan used by Ax Bazgan hung at Garda's waist. Needless to say, Esmena was holding it in her hands when she was taken from Taúlia. "Originally, I wanted to take my time winning your ether but… unfortunately, just for now, I can't afford to do it that way."

Garda drew up to Esmena and abruptly placed his palm before her eyes. As it cast a shadow over her pale face, with a start, Esmena's slender shoulders started to shake. She slowly blinked a few times. As though to match that pace, Garda spoke while wriggling his palm at a slight angle.

"I shall take the liberty to look into your heart and memories. As you are now, what is that occupies your heart? Or in other words, what is the most important thing that makes the current you yourself? Come, there is nothing to be afraid of. Before long, we will be one of body and mind."

The intervals between Esmena's blinking widened. Perhaps it was because of the shadows cast by the flickering flames, but the shape of the hand before Esmena's beautiful face seemed to change shape. Was it a dragon or was it a fiend? Either way, it was eerie.

After some time had passed, Garda's dry lips formed into an ominous smile.

"Ho. So the one you love fell victim to an evil scheme and died?"

As soon as Garda spoke, Esmena's body was seen to tremble. For a moment, a woeful expression flashed through her gaze that had been wandering vacantly and her eyes glistened. The flames flickered ever more furiously. The tears that reflected them were like red drops of light as they trickled and fell.

"I am the greatest sorcerer in the west, no, in the world. My name is Garda, he who has completely lined the western wilderness with skulls and dyed innumerable lakes the colour of blood. Everywhere where there are the stone cities of civilisation, the streets will be filled with voices extolling my name, towers will rise like my own fingers to grasp the heavens, and every temple will be converted into vessels of sorcery for me to manipulate ether. Do you understand it, Princess? My might, my terror, my power? If I will it, even the dead can revive from within the grave. Yes, their very aspect unchanged from when they were alive. And for that, Princess, none other than your cooperation is needed."

What were the expressions that crossed Esmena's face in one after another? Was it joy or hope, turmoil or despair? They could not be distinguished within the dark shadows, but Garda's smile unmistakably deepened.

"Ah, I can feel it. The strong force of the ether. As expected of the Bazgan House. You have inherited excellent blood. If it's with this…"

Plunged in thought, shivering as he gazed intently at Esmena, Garda did not notice.

Despite the strict orders that no one was to be allowed in the tower's underground, a single man had crept in.

The man’s name was Moldorf, the Red Dragon of Kadyne.

Carrying a spear in one hand, he approached the circular chamber.

“Go!”

At Nilgif’s shout, the entire three thousand troops launched themselves out of Eimen and rushed to attack the army of the western alliance led by Ax. In terms of numbers, their opponents surpassed them roughly twice over. But the enemy had fallen into a trap. Setting aside the human lives lost to the arrows, the dragons and horses that had been wounded were reacting violently, making it impossible for Ax set up battle formations.

This assault, which was akin to a surprise attack, had taken their combined efforts to carry out and for all that it was Ax, he would not be able to overturn the situation.

Yet there was no fiery heat boiling within the depths of Nilgif’s broad chest. Rather, it felt as if the blood flowing to his limbs had grown cold and solidified.

Yesterday, when he had only just arrived in Eimen, Nilgif had received horrifying news. A number of units that were posted as look-outs in the mountains had sighted black smoke rising from the direction of Kadyne. It had been confirmed that an air carrier from Garda’s army had left Eimen a few hours before that. There was only one possible inference.

Using the air carrier, Garda had burned the troops of the western alliance to ashes. Along with Kadyne. Along with its many inhabitants who had been in the city.

Nilgif had turned to hurriedly jump on horseback. There might still be survivors. They had to go help them at once.

But his foot had missed the stirrup and he had fallen where he was. After that, he wasn’t able to stand back up. The ground was warped and the sky was broken. It was as though a hole that would never be filled no matter how many years passed had opened in Nilgif’s heart, and he barely had any strength left to cling to the edge of that pit.

And after that, heedless of the fact that his men could see him, his large back had shaken and he had wept bitterly.

Let’s die, he had thought. *What is left when I’m already living in disgrace? I endured such humiliation simply to protect the people of Kadyne. But now Kadyne, my home, has vanished in flames*.

However… Like venomous serpents lifting their sickle-shaped heads, dark emotions rose in Nilgif's breast. Stirred to movement by those emotions, he was finally able to make his large frame crawl up from the hole in his heart.

But Garda, only after I've destroyed you. Until I've torn your fucking body to shreds, until I've taken your head and crushed your neck with my own teeth, I won't give up my life. Not to anyone!

His older brother Moldorf had rushed there and found Nilgif in tears, past caring about consequences and ready to turn even on his brother. He seized him by both shoulders.

"Look," despite the strength exerted to do so, the older brother's expression was strangely serene as he spoke. "There are people being held in Zer Ilias, your family included, and we can't leave them to die. Kadyne has not disappeared entirely. There are people who have survived even now, and now it is through them that Kadyne still exists, that our birthplace still exists."

"But, but, Brother…"

"But nothing. I am going to take this whole army and face Ax. You are going to take the best and go to Zer Illias. Now that the soldiers have all left, Zer Illias should be empty. Listen, we'll give our all in this fight. If we win, Garda will grow careless. If we lose, he'll make preparations for his next move. Either way, it will create an opening. And you will destroy Garda with your own hands."

Nilgif suddenly raised his head. His brother recognised his grim determination.

"No, that won't do, Brother." His tears fell as he shook his head. "I won't do. I'm impatient and not suited for infiltration. Garda would certainly notice. If I fail, Kadyne's people will be annihilated. Brother, you go."

"Nilgif…"

"It's alright. I'm still the man known as the Blue Dragon, Nilgif. No matter what kind of dishonour it brings, I will fight with all my might."

The brothers stared closely at each other. After a moment, Moldorf assented.

"Take Ax's head, Nilgif. The sorcerers will become suspicious unless you maintain that level of determination and intent. Even if you have to lose your men for nothing."

"I understand."

Nilgif recalled that conversation as he charged. He was crying already. Each tear he shed

was cold.

He was in the van, leading the cavalry unit, the pride of Kadyne. Riding small dragons, Fugrum's dragoons maintained a close formation as they charged in the centre. In breastplates and helmets decorated with plumes, Lakekish's tall and tenacious infantrymen dashed forward from either side.

And further out to both sides, surrounding the alliance's troops as swiftly as a gale, was Eimen's chariot squadrons. Pulling the chariots on which several archers rode were not horses but two Mantos dragons, which among the medium-sized breeds were particularly noted for their manoeuvrability. As though they were wheels, they whirred the six legs that grew from their elongated torsos and plunged forward. Other cavalry troops followed behind the chariot squadrons and, spread out in a fan shape, they positioned themselves to cut off the allied troops' path of retreat.

In terms of vigour, Nilgif was truly like a dragon itself as he moved through the centre and tore through Ax's large army as though it were made of paper.

"Yield!" He shouted as he brandished his spear, sending enemy heads flying. "Yield, yield!"

Who it was he was grieving for, he himself didn't know. Where he passed, blood swirled overhead.

With no chance to take up battle formation, the allied troops had started to retreat in the face of the enemy's onslaught. Even the commander-in-chief Ax Bazgan had gotten dragged into close combat.

Pulling hard on his reins as he destroyed an enemy spear, Ax shouted to the messenger unit.

"Bring out the air carriers. The enemy won't have a rear guard. Get right behind them!"

His opponents' blood spewed onto his face as he yelled. Ax also chose several of the best from his own bodyguards and had them accompany the messengers. Without giving him time to make sure that they had galloped away, enemies rushed in one after another. He narrowly avoided taking a sword to the face from a soldier whose belligerence appeared to mark him as being from a mountain tribe.

"Do you act knowing that I am Ax Bazgan, the master of Tauran? Fool."

"It's Ax. I'll have his head!"

The distance between him and the enemy had already closed. Ax hurled aside his spear and drew the sword at his waist. No doubt excited upon hearing the enemy commander's name, the soldier once again raised his sword overhead in a wide, sweeping movement. Ax pierced

him through the throat.

While he slaughtered a further three opponents, the shadows of the air carriers under his command appeared in the sky. Like that, they would carry out the plan to land reinforcements behind the enemy. This was the turning point to determine victory or defeat and Ax called out,

“Hold fast, my braves. Against Ax, whatever tricks the enemies use are useless, useless, useless. Come, strike at the enemy from in front and behind. If we just break through now, victory is ours!”

Shouts from the throng of friends and foes mingled and amidst the turmoil, even Ax, the commander-in-chief, could no longer tell whether it was the voice of his allies taking heart or of his enemies jeering.

In any case, since he was the one who had yelled out, Ax too was frantically holding his ground. How many times did he raise his sword high, how many opponents did he stab, how many enemies did he unseat from their horses? His own shoulders and arms were covered in shallow wounds. His face that had been overflowing with energy was starting to show traces of fatigue.

With eyes that were growing hazy, Ax looked up towards the sky. At long last, the air carriers had flown clear over the enemies and were about to get behind them.

But as he stared upwards, the ships started to behave strangely. Like leaves tossed about in a storm, they lurched left and right then immediately after, the ether emissions from their engines stopped and with their prows forward, they hurtled towards the ground.

“Fools.”

Of course, there was no way for Ax to hear that. In the vaults beneath Eimen’s tower, Garda roared with laughter. As the sorcerer who had summoned the illusions and the sandstorm, he had taken control of all of the ether in this territory.

As he watched the explosion from afar, Ax ground his teeth until he bled. The second ship was still just managing to continue cruising but its altitude was already low. So low it felt like he could touch it if he just reached up a hand from horseback. It was obvious that at this rate, it would share the same fate as the other ship.

We should retreat.

If they lost most of their men here, there would be no way afterwards to stop Garda’s invasion. A sharp pain pierced Ax Bazgan’s shoulder. Even as he was struck by the enemy’s blow, he thrust his sword at his opponent’s neck. The helmet came off, revealing the dead man’s face. It was a young man.

“Bastards!” Ax screamed at no one.

Chapter 7: The Ruler of the West

Part 1

Moldorf trod cautiously forward. Because he worried that the sound might get him noticed, he didn't wear any armour. A sword in a thick leather scabbard hung from his waist and he grasped a short spear in his right hand.

Although he had remonstrated with his younger brother, the regret and anger in his heart was no less than Nilgif's.

He had been prepared to bear eternal dishonour and had fought. Because there was something that he wanted to protect even in exchange of his own reputation. But in the blink of an eye, Garda had turned it into ashes.

When he thought of the people's anguish, even he felt like letting his cheeks bathe in hot tears, just as his little brother had. In truth, the reason that Moldorf didn't cry was because his heart had already wept so bitterly that his tears had all run dry.

But they hadn't been entirely abandoned by the Dragon Gods. What had worried Moldorf the most was that it would take at the very least an entire day to reach Zer Illias. If the battle ended while he was making his way there, there might never be another chance to get close to Garda. But then unexpectedly, that very Garda had left Zer Illias that he had always remained secluded in since appearing in the western lands and had moved to Eimen. Moreover, penetrating the tower was easy since the entire military force was being thrown at Ax's army.

The spear in Moldorf's hand was one used for throwing. He had vowed to himself that it would all be decided in a single strike.

If I had done this earlier, he thought. But he purposely decided not to dwell on it. What they had been anticipating up until now, Ax gathering together the west and making a move, had created a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Ten or more women, among them Lima Khadein, were gathered in a circular hall. In the centre was Garda. He was holding his hand up before a woman that Moldorf guessed was Taúlia's princess. The hand gripping the spear grew hot.

Don't think. Just do it. Just pierce him through the heart.

With his skill, he only needed to move forward and throw the spear in the same breath. And then it would be over.

But… That was only if his opponent was human and could he really compare Garda to a human being? Wouldn't it be better to take one more step closer? He needed to consider that there might not be another opportunity. In order to be absolutely certain, shouldn't he close the distance at least by another half a step? No, he was close enough. If he made a false move now, Garda might sense something.

Then, like this…

"Fool."

For a second, a sharp pain seemed to pierce Moldorf's forehead. Garda's hoarse voice could be heard. *Have I been spotted?* Moldorf felt his entrails go cold, but Garda's back was still turned towards him. On the other hand, a strange sight appeared before him.

No, it couldn't be said that he saw it with his naked eye. The image that flashed through Moldorf's brain was of something like a mist rising from each of the ten or more women, with Taúlia's princess at their centre. It formed a spiral and filled the hall. Hanging like clouds from the ceiling, the mist next spiralled counter-clockwise and contracted into a shape that resembled an arrow then suddenly pierced straight through the top of Garda's head.

Garda roared with laughter. The one he scoffed at for being a "fool" was Ax when he brought out the air carriers.

Assailed by headache and nausea and with his body feeling like it could break, Moldorf tightly grit his teeth and through sheer force of will, succeeded in not making a sound.

Is this sorcery?

It felt like a power that shouldn't exist in this world. The scene before him seemed somehow to spit on all living creatures like a blasphemy against them.

Gods, Moldorf took a throwing stance. His large biceps bulged, the muscles along his shoulders and back were stretched tight. *Dragon Gods, Spirits, every kind of god that anyone anywhere believes in, anything is fine. Gods! Grant me the strength to strike down this sorcerer who twists and distorts the laws of this world. Please let my insignificant self purify this evil at a single blow.*

He pulled back the right side of his body with all his strength and took a quick step forward.

In an instant, is body's taut muscles were released towards a single target.

The spear whistled through the air.

The spear drilled into Garda's chest and with unabated force, the tip pierced through his back and pinned him to the floor.

So it should certainly have been.

But in practice, Moldorf remained frozen in position as he took a step forward. His spear was still in his hand. As though it were stuck to his palm, the weight of the steel would not leave it.

"Fool."

This time, the voice was obviously directed towards Moldorf. The face of an elderly man peered out from under the hood. There was something evil about his smile.

"Did you think that I hadn't noticed your presence? As I am now, no plot, no sword and no spear could find me. I have a clear grasp of every phenomenon that occurs within the surrounding area and can freely manipulate them in actual fact."

"B-Bas-Bastard."

Moldorf let out a feeble voice from between his clenched teeth. He was struggling with all his might to break free of this curse but every time he tried to take a step in Garda's direction, invisible wire ropes seemed to bite into his entire body. The pain was so intense it almost reaped the valiant, long-serving general's consciousness.

"Y-You knew, so why…"

"You have already served your purpose." Garda chuckled mysteriously at his own words.

"Purpose?"

"After I have defeated Ax, it will be your turn next. Every last person in the west will consecrate their ether to me. Including of course everyone in Zer Illias. But you, you fought better than anyone and served me, Garda, well. As thanks, I will show you how I will devour the entire battlefield and gather ether. It will be the very moment of birth of the second Magic King Zodias, of the one who will rule the world!"

Moldorf's eyes became bloodshot and the lines of his sinews bulged. The sorcerer was saying that he would kill everyone. Not only Ax and his troops but also his little brother, Lima Khadein and the people in Zer Illias.

He roared. It was a bellow like a dragon's, fitting of his nickname, but as he couldn't break free, it was entirely pointless. Darkness stretched out between Garda and him, and even if he spent his entire life trying to cross that darkness, even if he spent a hundred or a thousand years, it felt like it would not be enough.

Bastard!

Moldorf's eyeballs that he could just barely move freely rolled left and right. He could feel that the thing like mist was continuing to be released from the ten or more maidens.

Then,

"Hmm?" Garda raised his eyebrows.

Something urgent must have come up because, even as he was still turned to face Moldorf, he looked at the bracelet on his left wrist. Moldorf saw a small shadow pass through the round jewel that was encrusted within it. Although he had absolutely no knowledge of sorcery, the scene that had appeared on its surface was surely the battle that was even now unfolding outside of Eimen. It was as vividly reproduced in this distant place as if a part of it had been cut off and trapped there.

Just as Garda had supposed they would, Ax's forces were finally fleeing. The troops led by Nilgif continued to press forward without slowing their offensive.

Garda's eyes were wandering around the battlefield when they suddenly stopped on one point.

As the chariot squadrons and cavalry had cut off their path of retreat, Ax's army was caught in a pincer movement to their front and rear when, from behind the enemies at their back, a group enveloped in a cloud of dust came galloping. Brandishing spears and swords, they lunged at the chariots with the force of a hurled javelin. Because of the unexpected surprise attack, the archers were flung one after another from the chariots by the Mantos dragons and even the cavalry was reeling.

They were strong.

And fast.

"Survivors from Kadyne?" Garda muttered balefully.

He knew who they were. The sorcerer dispatched to Kadyne to serve as a pathway had not only received ether from Garda but had also sent it to him. Garda had been able to sense that person's death. Conversely, he did not know what had happened in Kadyne after that.

But he could not have imagined that people who had been hideously tormented by his magical trap would turn to come to Eimen.

Above all else, there was the one horseman who was racing in the lead. Although his build was slight, he galloped fearlessly into the fray, unheeding of the forest of spears or of the dragon's claws. The man was undoubtedly responsible for fanning that army corps' vigour. He wore a mask.

The man suddenly grabbed something that was hanging from his horse's neck in one hand and held it high above his head.

"The sorcerer of Kadyne is dead!"

Amidst the steel blades that were moving to fall on him from all directions, his voice was clear and resonant. What he held to the sky was a man's severed head.

"Even a sorcerer will die when they're cut down. Garda is the same. How long will you let a single sorcerer deceive you? The one you should be fighting isn't us. From here on, I will defeat Garda. Know that anyone who gets in my way is an enemy to the west!"

"What!" Garda's eyes trembled with hatred.

In that instant, perhaps because his senses were turned elsewhere, the spell that bound Moldorf shattered into tiny pieces.

Moldorf stepped forward.

When Garda noticed it, startled, he once more put himself on guard. But the reason his reaction this time was slow was because Moldorf's target was incomprehensible. Having switched his position, he seemed about to throw the spear in completely different direction from Garda.

He threw the spear. Not at Garda.

The spear whistled up wind as it flew and its tip pointed towards a single woman.

Lima Khadein.

Part 2

“What did he say?” Nilgif groaned low, his face painted dark in the blood of his opponents.

Of course he remembered that masked swordsman. Both he and his brother had been made to suffer humiliation at his hands. As the man raised a severed head up high, he started to cross the battlefield.

Naturally, Nilgif also remembered the face of the sorcerer who had been stationed in Kadyne. He shivered at the thought that it might match that of the head the man was brandishing aloft. Nor was it just Nilgif. He could clearly see that unrest was circulating around this battlefield where friend and foe were jumbled together, communicating itself to both sides alike.

At the same moment, the allied air carrier which had been navigating shakily seemed to recover itself and stabilised its flight, then lowered its hull behind Nilgif and the others. From inside, five hundred soldiers of Taúlia’s Sixth Army Corps, led by Natokk, were let loose like a pack of wild dogs. Garda’s army found itself attacked from front and back.

“Blue Dragon!”

Hearing a voice call out to him, Nilgif had the impression that it was his brother scolding him. It was probably because he sensed genuine anger in that voice that his heart was overwhelmed.

“Gather your troops and go to Ax Bazgan. If you go over, Garda’s army should lend him their support bit by bit.”

“Wh-What are you…”

To Nilgif’s surprise, even as the masked swordsman said that, he galloped his horse straight towards him and raised his sword overhead. He was barely able to parry with his spear. As their weapons clashed a second then a third time, the swordsman brought his horse ever closer.

“I was in Kadyne,” his voice was almost a whisper. Nilgif stared at him wide-eyed. “Garda’s bombing raid killed many. But even so, many of the people are still alive. Believing that we, and you, the warriors of Kadyne, will bring victory, they remain there and live on.”

What further words could be needed? Nilgif’s bearded face was once more wet with tears. Those tears were unexpectedly warm.

“Where is Garda? In the ruins of the temple at Zer Illias?”

“N-No,” for some reason, Nilgif didn’t find it strange to answer as sword and spear collided between their respective armour. “For now, he’s in Eimen. Should be in the tower’s underground.”

“Then that’s convenient.”

“Wh-What’s convenient?”

Beneath his mask, the swordsman grinned and Nilgif felt shaken to the core.

“If I kill him here, it’s all over for them. Not even Garda can harm the hostages in Zer Illias once he’s dead.”

So saying, the swordsman kicked his horse’s flanks and, without the slightest vigilance against Nilgif, started to race away. He didn’t pay the any attention even when he was shouted at to “Wa-Wait!” Although Nilgif was dumbfounded, he called out once more as there was one thing he had to know.

“Your name. You, what’s your name?”

“Orba.”

That was all the answer he gave.

After that, he simply went onwards and ran and ran and ran. The severed head of the sorcerer was like a talisman that protected Orba from blades and the soldiers of Garda’s army didn’t go near him. No, at least half of them could no longer be called “Garda’s army”.

More than five hundred soldiers led by Bisham rushed to Ax’s side without a moment’s delay. They strengthened his defence and as Natokk’s force was also bearing down from behind, Garda’s soldiers were no longer able to focus solely on attack as they had a short while earlier. The sand-laden wind coiled around the battlefield like smoke, giving it a strangely stagnant appearance.

That stagnation was enough for Orba. With only a few mercenaries, he raced straight towards Eimen. There was no sign of enemies about to catch up with them. And even when some did try, they did so hesitatingly and only to be pushed back by Shique’s double swords or Gilliam’s battle-axe.

Is that it? On the other side of the outer walls, a tower soared into the heavens. The sky was dull and cloudy but Orba could see darker clouds that seemed to swirl around its top.

Having crossed Eimen's gates, Orba and the others rushed headlong to the tower at the centre. There was not a shadow of the townspeople to be seen. A dry wind blew through the streets.

They jumped from their horses once they were just by the tower but before its door hovered a silent shadow. As they wondered what it was, the shadow formed one-by-one into black-clad soldiers who drew the swords from at their waist.

"Move from there," Gilliam almost growled, his battle-axe on his shoulder. "If we defeat Garda, he won't be able to threaten you anymore and your families won't be in danger anymore. Now move!"

But as though they had no ears to hear with, the soldiers in black simply attacked. Let alone ears, they showed no evidence of having mouths to shout with or even minds of their own to think with.

"Looks like it's useless," said Stan. Because of the effects of ether, his complexion was still bad and he was swaying at the waist, but he still pulled out his sword. "They have a strange "colour". This bunch probably aren't being threatened. They might be Garda's personal guards."

"Then we don't need to worry, huh." No sooner had he spoken than Gilliam was the first to throw himself into the fray. As his battle-axe collided with the swords, the silent town was suddenly filled with the sounds of fighting.

The enemy was unquestionably skilled. Since Stan wasn't in his normal condition, even Talcott who usually preferred to stay safely behind him had no choice but to step forward and wield his sword. While hurling abuse, he showed off his lightning-fast swordplay.

Only Orba seemed to take up a position from which he could watch the struggle but, so smoothly and quietly that his feet didn't seem to be moving, he swiftly made his way past their backs and sides. Alone, he dived into the tower.

To deal with Garda, every second was precious. No matter how superior their position might be, the terror of sorcery permeated the body. So until he had snatched that life away with his own hands, he couldn't afford to be careless.

He felt dark killing intent draw up to him from behind but the one who thrust it away from the side was Gilliam.

"This is your chance, Captain. Go and seize greater glory than anyone in the west."

"I'm grateful."

Leaving those brief words behind, Orba's figure disappeared into the tower.

Gilliam jumped nimbly to put some distance between himself and the swords that were bearing down on him from front and back.

“Grateful, you say?” He shook his mane-like hair and beard and laughed. Swinging his axe in large, sweeping movements, he added, “It’s just like Lasvius once said. He really does speak like nobility.”

The spear struck vigorously. Lima Kadhein’s eyes opened wide and she went rigid as she stopped breathing.

Right next to where her soft hair swayed, the spearhead had embedded itself entirely and cracks were running in all directions along the stone wall.

Lima’s brown face paled, her eyes trembled and soon, large teardrops started to spill from them.

“Ngh,” Garda groaned.

Needless to say, the role of the maidens he had stolen away was to provide ether for as long as they lived. Yet it was clear that the blow from the spear had allowed Lima to regain her heart and consciousness. That was because a part of the ether supply system had been destroyed.

Moldorf knew nothing of sorcery but, with the intuition almost of a wild animal, he had aimed at what was causing unease to his five senses.

He then immediately pulled the sword from at his waist and rushed at Garda. It would not take him a second to reach a position from which his blade could send that head flying. The sorcerer’s face, which was like that of an unremarkable elderly man, showed anxiety.

But –

“Idiot.”

The sword was repelled by an invisible shield and Moldorf’s large body went staggering backwards. Garda’s arms that were like dead trees, both stretched out towards him. Underneath his hood, his entire face glistened with sweat.

“For a mere human, your judgment was sound. My compliments. But, after all, this is as far as you go. Do you think I, Garda, am so powerless that I could be taken down by you alone?”

Garda had absorbed the ether swirling about in the hall a number of times already. Unable to

let out his voice anymore, Moldorf reeled even more violently. It felt as though the air in the chamber had transformed into dozens of arms that were strangling his neck with superhuman strength.

The sword fell from his hand. Large veins stood out at his temples and his face was stained a deep red. But suddenly, it went pale. Froth dribbled from his lips and his countenance had a faint look of death.

“Moldorf!”

At that moment, a shadow ran towards Garda, aiming at his back. Completely focused on Moldorf, the sorcerer had let himself be approached surprisingly easily.

The glimmer of steel drew close. The tip of the blade sank in.

If that person had been a master swordsman, or not even, if it had been a grown man of normal strength, Garda’s life would probably have been cut short right then. But his opponent was Lima Khadein. She had picked up Moldorf’s sword, yes, but the weapon was too heavy for the princess’ arms and she was only able to tear a piece of skin from Garda’s back before stumbling to the ground.

“You!” At the searing pain in his back, Garda savagely turned around, his eyebrows contorted with hatred. Moldorf’s powerful frame fell like a stone. “You accursed Kadynians plague me one after another. Enough, I’ll kill you now for good.”

Garda made his bracelet gleam then suddenly raised a finger. The sword which had fallen to the floor seemed to squirm by itself then soared lightly up into the air. It rose higher while turning its tip around then stopped abruptly. Its point was aimed straight at Lima’s back where she had tumbled down.

Then it immediately cut through the air.

The rapidly accelerating sword had no less force than the spear that Moldorf had thrown earlier and it should have easily impaled Lima’s body.

But just as it was about to do so, the gleam from another blade shone.

Sword and sword clashed in mid-air then clattered to the ground as sparks scattered.

“What!” Garda turned his eyes wildly to the hall’s only entrance.

A shadow raced like a tempest. Faster than his eyes could follow, it rolled forward and picked up one of the swords that had fallen to the floor then without pausing ran to drive it into Garda’s breast.

“Gah!” Garda instantly invoked new magic. The fallen sword once again came to life and thrust itself between him and the shadowy figure.

The shadow suddenly stopped moving. But the hostility blazing in its eyes on the other side of the interposed sword could clearly be felt. A sharp glare pierced the sorcerer from behind the mask.

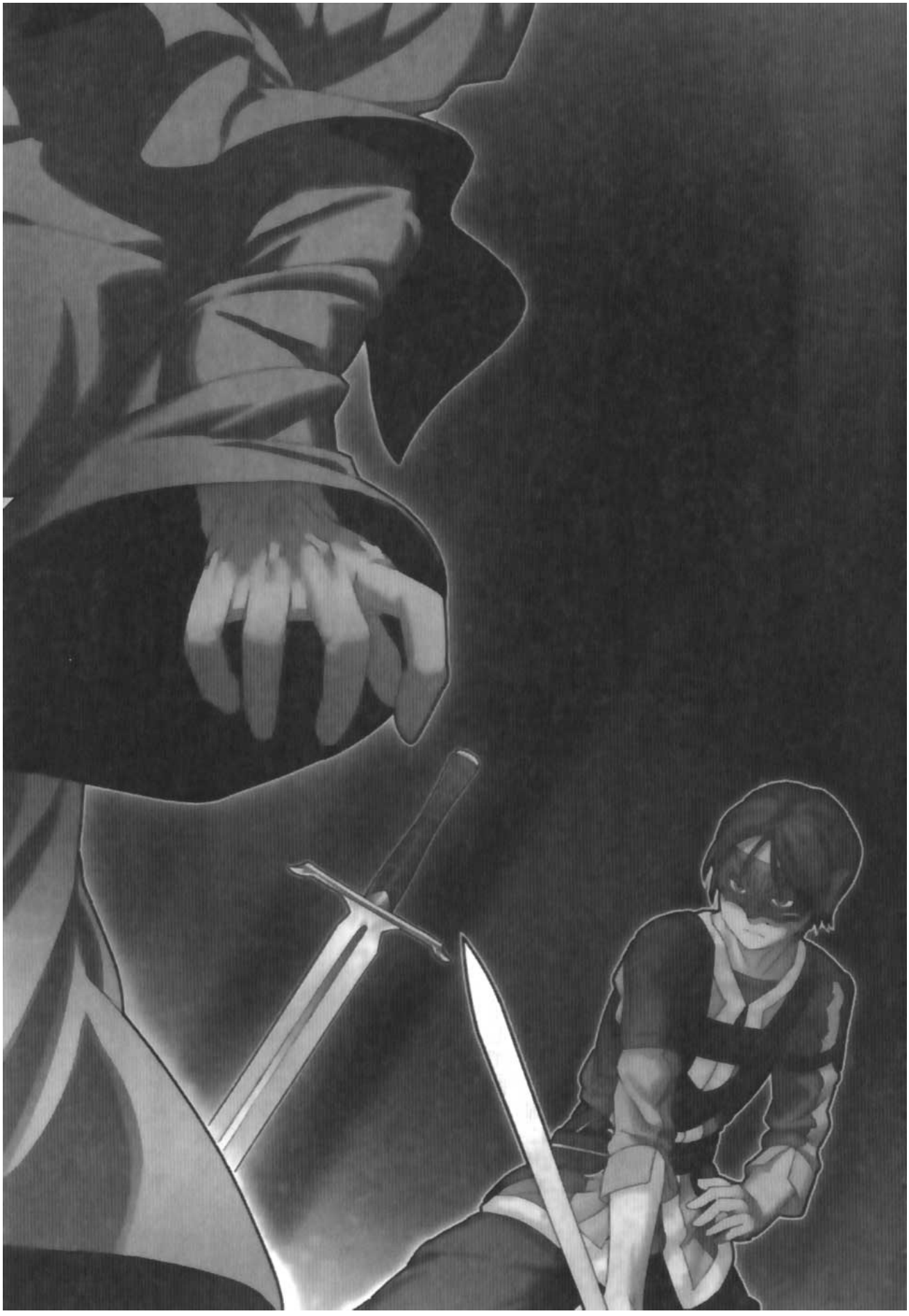
Garda now stood in Orba’s sight. The sorcerer who had claimed a name that had terrified Zerdians since two hundred years ago, who had taken the lead of a large army to invade the west and who had offered countless lives as sacrifices. He looked like nothing more than an ordinary old man and moreover, unexpectedly did not seem to be Zerdian. Something like a fragment of a jewel was buried in his forehead and glittered before Orba’s eyes.

“You are…” started Orba.

“You’re1…” Garda said venomously at the same time. He recognised him as the self-same swordsman that he had seen earlier in his bracelet.

The sword between them again floated in the air, glittering. Orba swept it aside and was about to step towards Garda but he jumped back as lightly as though wings had grown from his feet.

“You’re not Zerdian. Do you think that a brat like you could defeat Garda?”



“You’ve pointed a sword at me, think about what you can do next, sorcerer.”

“Ha. You seem confident in your own skill. Certainly, that you were able to track me down here means that after Moldorf, I now need to praise you.”

“The sorcerer in Kadyne said the same thing. And immediately after lost his life.”

“You’re conceited merely from having destroyed my pathway. I had already accomplished my goal in Kadyne. Thanks to that pathway, Zer Illias will be awash with ether.” Garda laughed arrogantly, displaying his slightly yellowing teeth. “Besides, there will be plenty more ether to be had on this battlefield. And I also have Esmena Bazgan here.”

Just as Garda indicated, there was the figure of a girl whom Orba knew by sight in the hall. He was naturally unable to prevent his surprise but he did not make the mistake of letting his agitation show in the middle of a fight.

“You were a step too slow, Boy. If you had arrived just a little sooner, you might have been able to beat me.”

“Shut up.”

As Orba was about to cut down the distance between them, Garda raised both hands. Black smoke poured out of the bracelets he wore on either arm. Orba was resolved not to stop advancing no matter what happened. That was because he was afraid of being bewitched by the sorcerer but, faster than Orba could predict, in front of his eyes – or no, everything he had been able to see was suddenly shut away in darkness.

“What!”

The sword he had jabbed forward tore through shadows. About to pitch over, he was just barely able to stiffly brace himself. He could only halt his movements and ready his sword once more.

In all directions: darkness.

He couldn’t even see his own hands and feet, nor the gleam of the steel whose weight was in his hand.

Orba took a single deep breath. Then he held it and, like a wild beast, let his five senses work at full throttle to try and detect any sign of the enemy by scent or from the flow of air.

He did not know how long he remained there quietly but at a time when his eyes would have adjusted had it been a normal darkness, a red light suddenly shone to Orba’s side.

Quickly raising his sword, he turned to face it while shielding his eyes. The colour of flames was flickering up there. By the time he felt the heat against his skin, a wall of fire had risen to above his height all around him.

Is it an illusion or…

He couldn't make a wrong move. Were these flames supposed to burn Orba to nothing or would his blind spot be attacked while his attention was focused on them?

Just then, he noticed that the air was flickering behind him.

There?

Without saying a word, balanced on the tip of his toes, Orba rotated his body at the same time as he swung his sword in a wide motion. The tip suddenly went still. Behind the mask, his eyes wavered. The one who stood there was not the abhorrent sorcerer. Nor was it a swordsman dressed and armed all in black.

"Orba," said the man.

"Brother." As his own voice burst out, Orba felt dizzy. How many years had it been since he had called out that word?

The one before him was without doubt his brother Roan.

But his brother's face was pale and the hand stretched out towards him was wet with blood. Unwittingly, Orba stepped back. Alice was also beside Roan. Her clothes emitted a pale, flickering light. The scene of the village being set ablaze vividly resurged in Orba's mind.

And behind the two of them was the unmistakable figure of his mother. Of his mother who had somehow lost her spark and whose eyes had grown dim after Roan had left for Apta.

No. This wasn't real. But even though he knew that, Orba couldn't tear his eyes away from them. They were the people he had never stopped searching for. The people he had already lost. Every time they took a step closer to him, the colour returned to their faces, their clouded eyes grew brighter and they smiled at Orba with the same appearances they had had when they were alive.

"Orba, Orba. What's wrong?" Roan's expression was one of gently chiding his rowdy little brother.

"Really, what's with the mask?" Alice giggled. "You're playing at heroes again, aren't you? Shouldn't you be going back home soon to give your mother a hand?"

“That’s right.” His mother – like she always did whenever she saw that Orba had been in a fight – gave a smile that was half exasperated, half resigned. “I won’t tell you to be more like Roan. But you can’t stay a child forever. Honestly, you get more and more like your reckless father every year.”

Stop.

He was supposed to have said that out loud. He had meant to shout it at the top of his lungs. But his lips were trembling and much less speak, he couldn’t even move a single step away from there, letting the ghosts draw near him.

Roan extended his hand and was about to touch his shoulder. In that instant, a feeling of inexplicable disgust surged throughout his entire body.

“Stop!”

He shook away the hand and leapt two or three steps back. He raised the tip of his sword and put himself on guard. “What is it, Orba?”

But without his having noticed it, Roan’s figure no longer stood before him but was by his right arm and had seized hold of his hand that was grasping the sword.

“That’s right, didn’t I tell you you’ve played enough?” Alice was at his left. She held his arm immobile with surprising strength and laughed softly in his ear. “Or perhaps…”

“Do you want to kill us?”

His mother approached from in front. Her lips slowly curled upwards, forming into a ghastly smile, tearing up higher and higher. And from that mouth a different face emerged, slimy with blood.

“Yeah, are you going to kill? Like you did us?”

At some point, the number of people around Orba had increased. The faces dripping with blood were those of all the gladiators that he had cut down and of all those he fought on the battlefield.

Flames crackled behind him. They always seemed to decorate his fights.

And there was one more –

This time, Orba almost screamed. Breaking away from among the ghosts, walking unsteadily towards him, was Oubary Bilan.

Part 3

“Y-You.”

A broken-sounding voice escaped from Orba’s mouth.

Oubary Bilan.

When his brother Roan had left as a soldier for Apta, he was man who had let him die. He was the man who had then burned the village that Orba and the others had taken refuge in.

He should already be dead. Orba had not landed the death blow when he caught that hated enemy in a trap but had successfully pinned the blame on him or the Crown Prince’s assassination. He had believed that he should already have been executed.

But that man was now approaching him, his whole face covered with soot.

“Impostor.” Oubary opened his burned, festering lips and spoke. “A fraud posing as the crown prince. Why did I have to be killed by the likes of you?”

“Why, why!” Orba screamed. His body was still being restrained by Roan and Alice. As Oubary drew closer, Orba’s eyes were filled with murder. “You should know why. You brought it all on yourself. Isn’t that right!”

“No,” Oubary pointed straight at Orba. As the finger was completely smashed, more than half of it dangled loosely. “You are not a noble lord. And yet you manoeuvred a great many people and killed a great many people. That is a privilege allowed only to those who bear a duty. Even though your existence is not recognised by the populace, you brandished your fake authority merely for the sake of your own goals and of your own desires. And then you killed. And killed. And killed. And killed.”

Killed, and killed, and killed…

The gladiators echoed Oubary’s voice like a chorus. The frightful sound encircled Orba and overwhelmed his ears like the reverberations of a tolling bell inside a narrow bowl.

Perhaps so as not to lose to it, he shouted, “It’s because you killed. If you hadn’t, I wouldn’t have had to kill anyone!”

“No, no, no, no,” the pallid ghosts all shook their heads at the same time. “The one who killed Oubary was you. The one who killed Roan was also you. You were the one who cut down

Alice and your mother and cast them into the flames. You who tossed duty aside from the start and wanted nothing but the privileges, you who murdered the innocent populace, who put branded slaves to the sword, who built a pile of corpses in your life."

Oubary's hand stretched out in the air. The crowd of hands of the gladiators followed it. And the hands of the soldiers.

Feeling as though his heart would stop, his field of vision filled completely with those hands, Orba watched as they approached towards him.

He was no longer able to tell if they were illusions or not. The voices of the dead had reawakened the pain concealed in the deepest part of his heart, exposed it and twisted it.

A scream like that of a child tore from his mouth.

The hands were approaching. The hands, the hands, the hands…

"Stop!"

He swung his sword wildly. From his haphazard swipes, you wouldn't have thought that he was a master swordsman but, by chance, one of the approaching hands was sent flying.

At that,

"Will you kill?" Roan's voice whispered in his ear. "You will kill, won't you Orba? Those who get in your way, those who are inconvenient, all of them."

"You're wrong. You're wrong, Brother. You're wrong."

"Then draw back your sword." This time, Alice's voice seemed to be pleading with him. "Don't kill. We've always been waiting for you."

Right. Behind the mask, tears spilled from Orba's eyes. He didn't want to hear anyone's voice. He didn't want Roan or Alice or his mother to condemn him. He had only been focused on revenge. Even while knowing that what was lost could never be regained. Even so, he had had no other purpose.

"Come, Orba."

"It would be good if you were here."

"You don't need to be afraid or to hesitate anymore. We will gladly take your heart. And then, we can all be together for ever."

"Come on, Orba."

“Come on.”

Half stupefied, half in a sort of ecstasy, Orba looked up at the crowd of hands descending upon him. The strength had left his body and the tip of his sword also hung down.

And then, he was enveloped.

Innumerable fingers stroked his skin. Those fingers that he felt slowly crawl over his arms, legs, torso, back, groin, granted him the same feeling of relief as when he had been an infant, sleeping cradled in his mother’s arms.

Right.

All of his tension melted away into the darkness, his fervent heart was smoothed out under those fingers and seemed to disappear. The swarm of fingers reached the nape of his neck then crawled up towards his lips.

Orba was on the verge of abandoning himself to that soft sensation. In a corner of his mind, a voice echoed incessantly, warning him that if yielded now he would never be able to return to the real world, but now that voice, the voice of instinct, was merely an annoyance.

Behind the mask, his eyelids slowly started to drop. The sensations from his body were now far away.

Almost everything that made Orba, Orba was crushed and scattered under the onslaught from that black wave until finally, even his consciousness grew murky.

Meanwhile, Garda was right under Orba’s nose. He had neither concealed himself nor called forth a shadowy dimension. The darkness that had wrapped around Orba was no more than the shadows within his own heart.

No matter how great or noble a person might be, there was no one whose heart was entirely encased in impenetrable steel armour. Somewhere, there would definitely be a spot that was weak and soft and on the other side of which, everyone harboured shadows to a greater or lesser extent.

When Garda seized hold of someone’s heart, his first step was to amplify those shadows. If his purpose was merely to remove an opponent, there was no need to go beyond that. A person who was swallowed by their own darkness had their heart destroyed.

Garda smiled triumphantly at the swordsman who had dropped his weapon and fallen to his knees.

“Hmm,” he chuckled, “he might be usable.”

He was the man who had killed Kadyne’s sorcerer, who had gathered the routed soldiers together and had brought them to Eimen. And furthermore, he had after all chased Garda down all the way here. So once this battle was over, he intended to brainwash Orba and make him into one of his personal guards – in other words, into one of the black-clad swordsmen. Just as it had with the maidens he had kidnapped, it would take time for Garda to sift through his very memories and alter them himself.

“And so, you’re going to be in agony a little longer. I need to strike another blow against that western lot so that they don’t get carried away.”

When he once again gazed into the jewel within his bracelet, the state of the battle was changing. The soldiers glared at each other on the blood-soaked plain, unable to tell who was a friend and who was a foe.

There was still people engaging in combat but at some point the low moans from the wounded and the sound of the wind had grown greater than that of rough voices and shouts.

Garda focused his mind and closed his eyes.

Those on the battlefield did not notice that at that moment, the air carrier, after having disgorged its many soldiers, was visibly jerking and squirming, like a flying ant putting up its last resistance after having been crushed by a human hand. Garda had hit it with the ether that was swirling around the battlefield and had swatted it towards a group of soldiers who would probably soon make their way to Eimen, with the intention of dropping it on their heads.

Whether they were allies or enemies no longer mattered to him. If he could ultimately weaken the enemy's chase and delay them, then that small bit of time would allow him to leave for Zer Illias by airship..

From that demonic capital, in which far greater stocks of ether were stored than here, he would ambush whatever few opponents remained. Naturally, that wasn’t what he had initially planned but given how things were turning out, he didn’t have any choice.

“It’s fine. Troops can easily be scraped together again. But since you defied Garda to this extent, know that you will never have another peaceful night. I will obliterate the western people and utterly drain your souls of ether.”

With both hands, he traced a complicated pattern in the air. The air carrier’s large frame undulated. A blaze seemed to burn within the ether-emitting engines.

Garda smiled broadly.

“Ah yes, Princess of Taúlia. Send me stronger ether. Open your heart to the point of being as one with me, then consecrate your all to me. Just a little more, just a little more and I will grant your wish.”

Thereupon, the mist rising from Esmena grew denser and the movements of the air carrier grew correspondingly fiercer. The jewel fragment in Garda’s brow turned a colour that was impossible to describe and emitted an ominous radiance. Sensing a strong surge of ether within his body, he laughed out loud.

“Yes, so that your beloved Gil Mephius will be revived!”

At the same moment, like wind blowing from far away, the name “Gil Mephius” brushed past Orba’s ears. Suddenly opening his eyes wide, he became aware of the innumerable hands encircling him and of the innumerable faces surrounding him behind them. The dead who had been raised from his memories drifted in this space outlined by flames and dyed a grotesque colour, neither black nor white, as they smiled at him, cursed at him, spoke to him.

But amongst them, there was one who had its back to him.

Who is that?

Preoccupied by that person, Orba’s vanishing consciousness surfaced as though rising from the muddy depths of an ocean.

Who are you?

Orba called out repeatedly. As he did so, other faces and swarms of hands got in his way and prevented him from seeing, while the figure seemed so ephemeral that it looked like it might disappear in an instant. But –

Ah!

When the person glanced over his shoulder and turned his profile towards him, Orba’s re-surfacing accelerated.

“You’re…”

A pair of eyes looked out from a suntanned face. His build was somewhat on the small side for a fighter but he was extremely nimble and smoothly escaped whenever Orba seemed about to catch hold of him. Somehow, that figure was perfectly identical to the one Orba saw whenever he stood in front of a mirror, and so he called out a name.

“Gil Mephius.”

The man standing opposite him seemed to part his lips slightly. But not into a smile with any warmth. It was an unpleasant smile, one that made the recipient feel as though they had been hit by a wave of utter contempt and disdain.

“You, why are you here?”

For some reason, he felt extremely agitated. “He” should no longer be in this world. Meaning that it couldn’t be the real Gil Mephius. Orba had replaced him and, after struggling through numerous battles, he was supposed to have buried Crown Prince Gil with his own hands.

Are you scorning me? Me, who even used innocent people and killed them? Orba wondered for a moment but then, the ghosts that had been about to bear down on him turned their hostility against Gil Mephius, even though he should be the same kind of phantom as they were.

Each of the dead bore the faces of soldiers from the opposing side of the battles that Orba had been in command of as Gil. There were Garberan knights, Mephian fighters who had risen in rebellion with Zaat Quark, Taúlian soldiers and warriors from Ende.

Faced with that vast number of ghosts, Gil again seemed identical to Orba in body and spirit. His blade flashed before Orba’s eyes, glittering red as it reflected the flames.

“Stop,” he almost said unintentionally. But Gil didn’t display the slightest hesitation as he cut them down one after another. The ghosts were careless and nowhere near good enough, and they seemed to jump up merely for the sake of being killed by Gil once again.

Heads whirled, limbs flew and as each one lost part of their body, they sagged in Orba’s direction.

“Stop, stop, stop.”

But even as he cried out –

What is there to hesitate about?

Orba heard a voice like his own within himself. Or rather, wasn’t it the voice of Gil Mephius’ phantom?

I was the one who killed them. Whether I defeated them directly myself or whether they were killed by someone following my orders. Why should I need to hesitate about killing them again? After all, they can’t rest in peace unless they accept their own death.

To Orba's stupefaction, the thing that looked like Gil Mephius shook off the ghosts and as he watched, walked towards the flames that surrounded the area. He seemed to have chosen to commit suicide. But, just as Gil was about to step into the fire, the ghosts that he had cut down jerkily staggered up. Gil raised his hand as though giving an order to his subordinates and, looking like puppets hung from strings, they climbed on each other's shoulders, joined hands and feet, then fell forward, creating an arched bridge that extended over the sea of flames.

Without hesitation, Gil firmly trod on the bridge formed by their backs and started to cross it.

"Wait!"

This time, Orba felt horribly afraid of being left behind by Gil Mephius and unthinkingly chased after him. Just like Gil, he was about to step on the ghosts' backs when,

"Orba." Roan's voice called out once more. It wasn't chasing him from behind however. It came from in front, from exactly the direction of the "bridge" that Orba was about to place a foot on.

"Hii," he let out a strange voice. The ashen-skinned ghost whose arms and legs were intertwined in a complex pattern with those of other people was Roan himself.

"Where are you going, Orba?"

"Are you going to leave us and run away?" With Roan's hand wrapped around her foot, Alice formed part of the bridge. Further beyond, he could see his mother and people that he recognised from the village.

"Orba wouldn't do something like that. Isn't that right?"

"Right. You'll stay with us here forever. Since that's your wish."

Roan and Alice's voices once more drew up from behind him so that Orba felt like he was being attacked from all sides by echoes that seemed layered one on top of the other.

Gil Mephius, who had reached the summit of the bridge's arch, turned to look back at Orba who stood petrified with horror.

You're not coming? He asked with his eyes. He sneered. *Are you afraid? That you will never meet these people again? What a complete idiot*.

"What!" As Orba bellowed reflexively, Gil smiled faintly and suddenly vanished. In his place, a voice was projected from far away.

Lord Gil.

Orba's eyes widened in surprise. Now that Gil was gone, he could make out the end of the bridge. Something was flickering. At that one, single point, the surrounding darkness lifted slightly and what lay beyond it could just be seen.

Garda was there. And standing as though to block the way between him and Orba was Esmena. Perhaps by some trick of the ether, this time Orba could see the wave of magic power rising from her. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end at the sight of what looked like a giant hand tightening around Esmena's delicate body, as though to squeeze every last drop of lifeblood from her.

Amidst that, she sobbed like a child, incessantly,

Lord Gil, Lord Gil, Lord Gil.

As her heart called the name of a man she had met no more than once or twice, the princess of Taúlia wept. The tears trailing down her cheeks were the colour of blood.

Orba gulped.

I'm…

He felt himself unable to move. It was different from when the ghosts' hands had been holding him back. It felt as though rather than his arms and legs, something within him, a softer, less tempered part inside of him had been seized hold of.

In front of him, a bridge of corpses. Behind him, a crowd of ghosts drawing ever nearer.

For some reason, at that moment, Esmena's anguished voice and figure overlapped with those of completely different people that he could perceive on the other side of the rising flames. He could see the figure of the mother who had died protecting her child when Kadyne was set ablaze. And mixed with Esmena's cries, he could hear those of the young mother who had lost her child and who was clawing at the surface of the road.

The sound of swordfights shook his eardrums. It seemed to him that he was seeing actual images of his comrades and of the western soldiers who were still fighting.

The clammy heat of the flames licked his entire body. The beat in his chest pounded until his ears hurt.

Of course, even if he stretched out his hand, it wouldn't reach Esmena. The wails and gasps of agony of the people and soldiers filled his ears and echoed directly inside him.

To get to them – he had to step on the dead that now stretched out before him. He would have to shake off those he had lost and had never stopped longing for.

Orba understood. Why Gil Mephius had appeared among the semblances of the dead. His heart overflowed with emotions and desires that he hadn't been able to grasp hold of since taking revenge on Oubary. And then –

Esmena's hair now swayed platinum and the figure of a completely different girl was projected before him.

A girl with a strong gaze who steadfastly looked him straight in the eyes. Orba, who wore a mask of falsehood, had always fled from that. Even now, the girl directed her eyes right at him.

Orba lowered his head.

I'm…

But immediately raising his eyes, as though pulled towards that strong gaze, he trampled on the ghosts' backs. Treading firmly on Roan's head, stamping on Alice's back, feeling the heat rising from the flames below, he raced across the bridge.

"Wait."

The ghosts behind him simultaneously emitted hostility and crossed onto the bridge, stretching a crowd of hands towards him once more.

"Wait."

"Wait, wait. Are you running away?"

"Wait, wait, wait. You're leaving us behind. You're banishing us. Are you planning on running away?"

No, as he looked back, Orba brandished his sword. As it hummed through the air, he cleaved at a single stroke through the swarm of pursuing hands and through the very shadows themselves.

He wasn't a bystander this time. Orba swung his sword as an expression of his own intent.

I'm not running away. Rather…

Orba did not avert his gaze from the resentful eyes turned towards him, and even though the surrounding darkness had cleared away, he gave his body over to them.

Part 4

Orba's body suddenly grew very heavy. It was the weight of a body and heart that others had entrusted themselves to.

Noticing Orba's voice when he coughed violently, Garda's face showed surprised.

"What!" Seeing Orba starting to stagger to his feet, Garda's expression then momentarily turned to one of utter amazement. However, "Eei, I don't have time to deal with you. Sleep a bit longer!"

Genuine animosity finally darted from his eyes as he pointed his staff towards Orba. Just as darkness seemed about to spill from it once more, Orba closed his eyes.

He had encountered many "Roans" on the battlefield. The faces of the phantoms he had just seen flittered across the back of his eyelids. Here in the western lands of Tauran, he had witnessed more than enough people like his mother and Alice who had lost their families and their everyday lives when their towns were burned down.

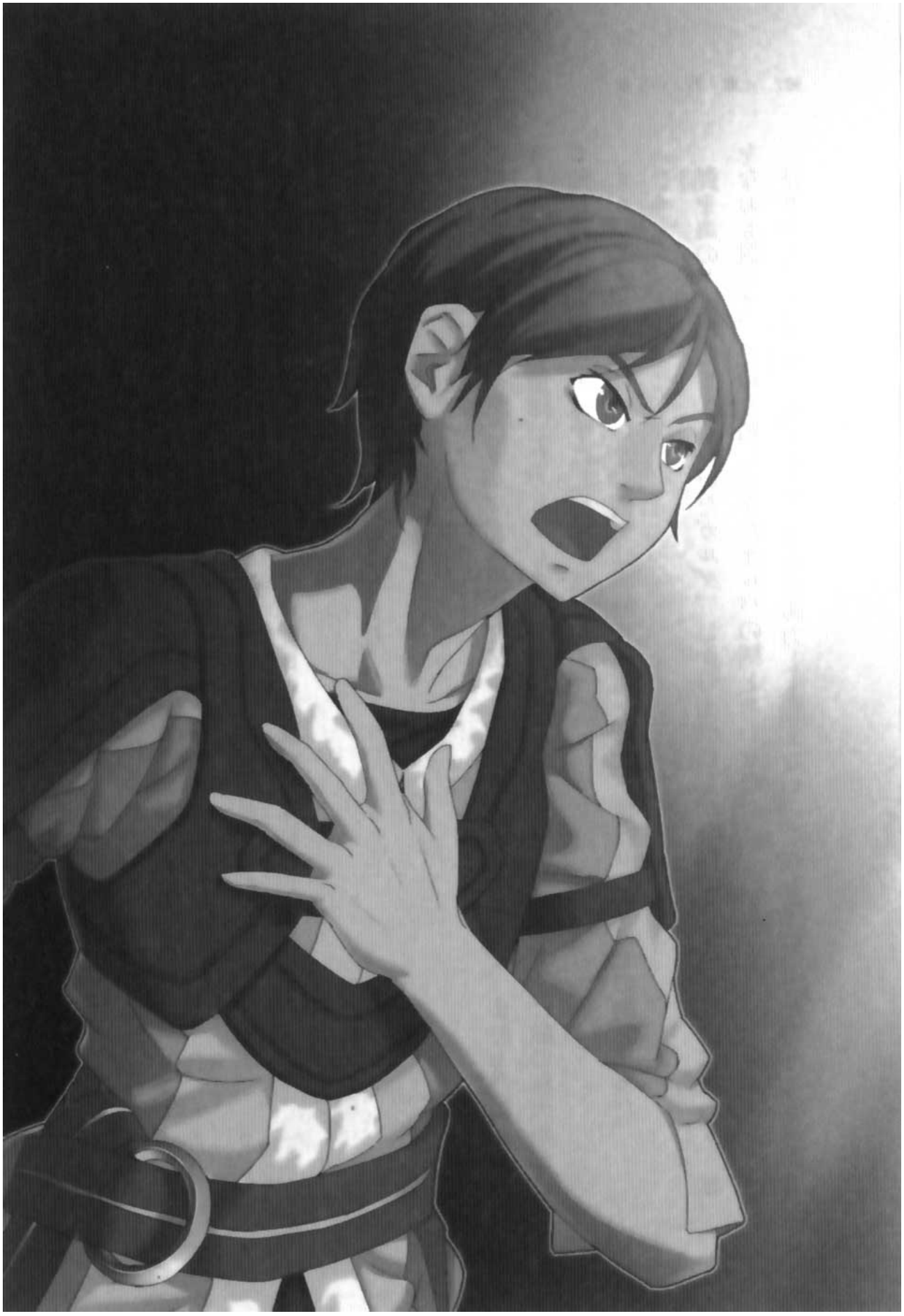
It's already… What hesitations did he harbour within himself, what decision had he reached?

He lifted his hand and held the edge of his mask with his fingers.

"Whatever a mere human does, it's useless," Garda sneered as he was about to cast magic on Orba a second time. At the same moment, Orba removed his mask.

"It's me, Princess. Gil Mephius!" He yelled at the top of his lungs.

Of course at that time, Garda could not possibly have guessed. That when the swordsman removed the mask concealing his face, he would still be wearing another "mask". And that as soon as that "mask" appeared, the flow of ether emanating from Esmena would rapidly dry up.



Life almost instantly returned to her face that had been blank and as that of one who was dreaming. A reddish tinge spread over her cheeks and a steel grey sparkle appeared in her eyes. Orba yelled again,

“Mephius’ Crown Prince Gil Mephius didn’t die or run and hide. I’m here!”

At the same time as Esmena’s expression was struck with surprise and tears spilled from her eyes, Garda looked towards her in confused dismay.

“What is the meaning of this? This…”

At that moment – Orba’s feet kicked the ground.

As sharp as an arrow, he covered the distance between Garda and himself. The startled sorcerer again escaped backwards at a speed that seemed unthinkable for his age. But Orba’s steps did not halt. He leaped up and brought his sword down towards his opponent’s head. Garda held up the staff in his hands.

Orba’s feet landed on the ground. The tip of his sword instantly changed direction and swept towards the sorcerer’s heart.

“Guh!”

Garda staggered, clots of blood smearing his beard, but he still hadn’t lost his tenacious fervour for life and he swung the staff once more, stopping Orba’s sword as it lunged towards him.

The shock ran through his arm. That strength was also unthinkable for an old man. That too was probably the power of sorcery. For a while, both of them fought without speaking.

“Send it!” Garda yelled, blood spraying from his mouth. “Send the ether in Zer Illias to me at once. Do you hear me, Tahī? What are you doing!”

What happened at that moment in that area that only a sorcerer could understand? Garda’s face wore an expression of far greater astonishment than it had when the supply of ether coming from Esmena was severed.

“Why, why? My ether is being sucked up. What’s going on? It’s as though… there isn’t a pathway towards me!”

“Garda.”

“Yes, I’m Garda. Garda himself.”

Pressing on with strength, Orba suddenly sprang several steps forward. He gave a shout that

almost sounded mad and, just as Garda raised his staff in defence, Orba's sword drew a glittering arc.

The wind it raised was still whistling as, this time, steel drove into Garda's head.

With a dreadful expression, his eyelids peeled back from the whites of his eyes as blood trickled from their outer corners, the old sorcerer collapsed without a word.

Something fell from Garda's head. The jewel fragment that had been at his forehead. Even though it had seemed deeply embedded, as though the jewel itself had lost its power along with its owner's life, its ominous glow faded and it looked like any valueless stone as it rolled to the floor.

His breathing ragged, Orba gazed down at the remains of the man who, just a moment earlier, had been on the verge of controlling all of the western lands. It was clear that the heat was rapidly being snatched from the body. It was always the same thing. His heart that had seemed to be set ablaze in the moment he brought the fight to its end was cooling down along with his body and in its place he experienced a sense of futility and lethargy.

"Moldorf, Moldorf!"

He heard a woman shouting. When he looked, he saw that Moldorf, who had collapsed, was starting to regain consciousness. Lima Khadein – although of course Orba knew neither her name nor her identity – was kneeling beside him and had lifted him up in her arms.

"P-Princess," gasping for breath, Moldorf raised his upper body.

He stared at the sobbing Lima in a daze then looked around the hall in utter amazement. His eyes travelled between Garda's corpse, the mask that had tumbled to the floor and then towards Orba.

"B-Boy. You. You did it!"

Silently, without so much as smiling, Orba simply gave a slight nod. Moldorf heaved a sigh that seemed to come from the depth of his being. After a moment, he appeared to be concerned over something and separated himself from Lima, who was still holding him.

"Princess. I pointed a spear at you. I am unworthy of being in your presence like this."

"What are you saying. Moldorf, I am in your debt."

"If my aim had been off by even a fraction, I would have taken your life, Princess… No, at that moment, I even thought that even if that happened, it didn't matter. How could someone like that ever face Kadyne's royal family again."

“Yes, Moldorf. You were kind enough to kill me.”

“P-Princess.”

Tears glistened in Lima’s eyes and, nestling close to the bearded general as though to the man she longed for, she took his arm.

“I am the one who lead Kadyne to ruin. You killed that person that I was and in doing so saved me. I thank you, Moldorf. You are a true protector of the royal family.”

Having come to that point, Moldorf finally allowed himself to weep. His figure, as his shoulders heaved and he shook with sobs, greatly resembled that of his younger brother.

As Orba was watching that scene, he felt a presence standing before him and turned to face it.

“A-Are you…” It was Esmena Bazgan. Her eyes round, she stretched out a trembling hand. “Are you, Prince Gil? Are you truly His Highness, Gil Mephius?”

Orba didn’t answer. Although his mask had fallen within reach, for some reason, it seemed terribly far away.

“Am I still being tricked by Garda’s magic? Is this another sweet illusion? Please, Your Highness. Please say something. Please say that you are Gil Mephius.”

The tears flowing from those steel grey eyes seemed ceaseless. Orba shook his sword and blood flew off it.

“Princess, I…”

His voice wouldn’t come out to give the name. His eyes also avoided Esmena’s. He knew that he only had to say a single sentence. All he needed to say was “I’m Gil Mephius.” But,

“I’m –”

All he could manage was to repeat that. Then,

“It doesn’t matter.” As soon as Esmena cried out, Orba could feel himself being warmly embraced. “It doesn’t matter. A dream or a phantom, it doesn’t matter. Your Highness Gil! Please, even if it is only a dream, please stay like this a while.”

As she sobbed, Esmena clung to Orba with unexpected strength.

Epilogue

The fight in front of Eimen's tower was coming to an end. One after another, the black-clad swordsmen tumbled down onto the blood-spattered road. In the end, even as they were run through by swords, they didn't utter a single word.

As Shique, Gilliam and the other mercenaries were catching their breath and setting down their bloodstained weapons, they heard the rough clattering of horses' hooves coming up to them.

The Blue Dragon Nilgif was astride his steed. Following behind him were soldiers from Kadyne's cavalry.

"Shit," Gilliam hefted his axe onto his shoulder.

Who was an enemy, who was an ally – in the circumstances it wasn't clear and for a moment, the mercenaries and Nilgif's group glared at each other. Then,

"Brother!" Nilgif cried out as his bloodlust instantly fell and a joyful look came over his face.

"Orba!" At the same moment, Shique also turned to face the same direction.

Orba and Moldorf emerged from the tower entrance, each carrying one of the princesses. Taúlia's princess Esmena and Kadyne's princess Lima both had their eyes closed and were sleeping in the warriors' arms. Perhaps as an after-effect of the sorcery, now that the thread of tension had been cut, the two of them had collapsed.

"Brother," Nilgif shouted in a rush. "Brother, you did it?"

"Well," the Red Dragon Moldorf's face couldn't be called either exhausted or content as he glanced towards Orba. He was wearing his mask. Moldorf had not questioned him as to why. "You should ask this man."

Nilgif's expression turned bewildered at his brother's strange way of speaking. Despite being urged to do so, Orba didn't seem about to open his mouth and handed the princess over to one of the men of his group.

Before long, a series of soldiers from every country came racing to Eimen. There were people from Fugrum and soldiers from Lakekish. And with them were warriors from Helio whom they had been fighting against just moments ago.

“Orba,” called out Bisham, the company commander who had gathered together the detached force from Helio and who had also hurried over. “Garda… Don’t tell me you did it?”

“Wait until Lord Ax gets here.”

“What?”

“Wait until Lord Ax Bazgan gets here. Until then, I’m not answering, no matter who’s asking or what the questions are.”

From a moment, everyone gathered there dumbfounded at Orba’s calm words.

“What kind of stupidity is this!”

A man who seemed to be a commander from Lakekish thundered in a voice that was more like a roar. As proof that he had fought valiantly on the battlefield, his armour was dyed a deep crimson. The ones he had slaughtered had of course been soldiers of the western alliance. Yet even so, he now stood shoulder to shoulder with soldiers from Helio, one of the allied forces, and his lance was lowered, all because there was the hope that Garda might be dead.

But if that weren’t the case, if, even after having been chased this far Garda had still been able to escape, in order to protect their families, they might very well attack the Helian soldiers standing next to them. Perhaps because their own fates were constantly changing, they no longer knew what to expect this time either.

“Answer! Or is it that you’re Garda’s messenger? What happened to the bastard?”

“I said I wouldn’t answer.”

“You won’t talk,” the commander snorted and turned to his nearby subordinates. “We’re going in the tower. To check with our own eyes.”

Aye responded several soldiers and they were about to rush into the tower when at the same moment, Orba did something that nobody would have imagined.

“Men!” He called as he unsheathed his sword.

At that command, the mercenaries all drew their swords simultaneously and arrayed themselves in front of the tower. Disconcerted, the soldiers who had been about to enter it halted their steps.

“Wha-, What are you planning?”

“No one is to enter,” Orba said impassively. “No one other than us is qualified to do so.”

“What do you mean by qualified?” Increasingly unable to understand Orba’s intentions, Bisham raised a perplexed voice.

By that time, the soldiers from Fugrum had also drawn their swords.

“So you’re saying that the man who kills you would qualify? Then we’ll do as you wish!” They threatened but Orba laughed contemptuously.

“We’ve taken possession of this tower. Without an order from our lord, Ax Bazgan, we cannot vacate it.”

“Taken possession…” The words floated through the minds of each of the soldiers there. They were aggravated by this vague situation in which they didn’t know whether or not the war had ended. It wouldn’t be surprising if the killing started up again yet Orba’s words, along with his composure in front of so many people fanned the flames of hope that had been lit in the Zerdians’ hearts.

Filled with the contradictory feelings of irritation and expectation, they gazed at the masked swordsman who had taken up position in front of the tower and at the mercenaries who accompanied him. Their forceful expressions, that were entirely those of soldiers who had accomplished some incomparable feat, made an impression on the men gathered there.

The commander from Lakekish loudly clicked his tongue. “Aye, nothing will come of it if we quarrel at this point. Let Lord Ax come here. We’ll go bring him.”

After that, regardless of where their birthplace was, regardless of if they were from Lakekish, Eimen or Helio, a number of soldiers went back along the road they had come. For a while, a strained silence blew through the streets of Eimen along with the sand-laden wind.

Using his sword in place of cane/staff, both hands resting on the hilt, he stood as still as a guardsman in front of the tower.

As he remained like that, a crowd of soldiers entered Eimen. The faint commotion from where those who had left a while earlier were explaining the situation mixed with the snorts of horses and the howls of dragons who were greedily devouring corpses in the distance. For some reason, those sounds seemed to make the masked swordsman who stood as still as a statue stand out all the more.

Soon, the sound of a great many horses’ hooves approached.

“Oh!”

A stir ran through the soldiers as they recognised the figure of Ax Bazgan in the lead, and they almost seemed to be racing against each other to open up a path for him. Here again there was

no thought of allies or enemies. Everyone had been impatiently awaiting his arrival. Bisham's expression turned surprised.

So it's like this?

Having of course heard the story as he was on his way there, Ax Bazgan leapt from his horse and briskly walked up towards Orba.

Orba and Ax looked at each other. Then Orba placed his sword to the ground and knelt with supple movements. The mercenaries arrayed behind him did likewise. Ax stopped in front of Orba.

"Let's hear it," he said. "Where is Garda. What happened in there?"

"Garda is in the tower's underground." The Zerdians fell completely silent so as not to miss a single word Orba spoke. He continued, "The Heavens bestowed fortune in war to Lord Ax and also to us. I took his head with this sword."

For a moment, it was like the Nâga, the bird of misfortune that was said, since the days of the Magic Dynasty, to steal people's voices, had swooped down.

The crowd erupted.

"Well done!" Ax clapped Orba on the shoulder.

As though to make up for the previous silence, Eimen, which for so long had been like a deserted and abandoned city, was filled with shouts of joy. They were so loud that it seemed like those voices would race around the western lands and tell the people of their victory faster than any messenger on horseback or by airship could.

Commanders from countries such as Lakekish and Fugrum, countries which had been attacked relatively early on, had been summoned to Zer Illias and had met with Garda face-to-face. With Ax's permission, they entered inside and when they confirmed that they had found Garda's corpse, the exhilaration could no longer be contained.

There were those who laughed, those who cried, those who embraced one another in their joy and among them, those who fell to their knees in a stupor. There was no longer any such thing as an allied or an enemy country. Without caring who the others were, the Zerdians flew into each other's arms, slapped each other's shoulders, rubbed their bearded faces together then roared out loud cheers.

"Boy!" Amidst the madness, Moldorf drew up to Orba, his brother following behind him. "No, I heard from my little brother. It seems that you are called Orba. Orba, we won't be able

to rest easy until we've seen our families so we will be going now to Zer Illias. Let us meet again afterwards."

"Any time as long as it's not on horseback with a spear in hand."

"Ha ha," Moldorf laughed cheerfully then suddenly brought his face closer. He whispered in a voice that no one else could hear, "I'll forget what Taúlia's princess said to you. Although I'm sure the details are fascinating."

"Well," Orba "Maybe the princess saw an illusion under the effects of the magic. I wouldn't know."

Moldorf didn't answer and thumped him on the shoulder just like Ax had done a while earlier then left with his brother and men in tow.

Meanwhile, Ax was reunited with his daughter who had been left in the care of Orba's unit. When he had learned that Esmena had been kidnapped, he had in a sense been more astounded than when the enemy had hidden behind a sandstorm and attacked by surprise.

Voices extolling the praises of Ax Bazgan resounded throughout Eimen.

Orba heard them as he was returning the sword to his waist. The one who had defeated Garda was not a masked mercenary. The one who had brought the west together to fight the sorcerer was Ax Bazgan. His name would go down in history.

Tauran has no king.

Orba had thought about it repeatedly and had keenly been made to realise that Tauran needed a king.

Tauran had no king – until now.

Orba would never have imagined that the day would come when he would want the existence of a ruler.

What kind of existences should kings and nobles be for the people? The faces of Mephius' emperor, Garbera's prince and Ende's young lord floated in his mind, followed by the figures of Ax and Marilène. However, feeling utterly stupid for accidentally losing himself in those thoughts, Orba wiped away some sand from his mask with his fingers and muttered with a feeling of despair.

"But who knows what comes after this."

He looked at the crowd that was rejoicing to the point of frenzy.

Will there be another struggle for supremacy or will they choose a different path? Who knows what is going to come after this.

“Why the glum look!”

Orba staggered. Gilliam’s hand had suddenly clapped him on the back. As Orba was coughing violently, his entire unit gathered around him.

At the same time, in Zer Illias.

Before the altar where Reizus had once proclaimed himself Garda where two figures. The dignified and elderly Zafar and the sorceress Tahī, the suppleness of whose body was obvious simply from her standing upright.

“I see. So ‘Garda’ was defeated?” The rumbling, echoing voice did not belong to either of them.

The two sorcerers were kneeling before the altar, on top of which had been placed a crystal that resembled a humanoid dragon skull.

“That was earlier than expected.”

“Yes,” Zafar hung his head. “Our deepest apologies. If we had been allowed greater participation, we could have collected more ether from the humans of Tauran.”

“It’s fine,” the disembodied voice spoke again. “You would not want other sorcerers to notice that you were recklessly making free use of power. It was I who ordered you to devote yourselves entirely to the preparations.”

“Aye.”

“In any event, we have finished laying the groundwork in the west according to plan. That is enough.”

“What would you have us do about Zer Illias?” Tahī parted her plump, full lips and asked. “There are still the humans here that we captured from the western lands. Should we cut off all of their heads and gather the ether from them?”

“No need. Soldiers will soon be hastening there. They will have but a short time to savour the taste of victory. It would be boorish to spoil it for them, so leave be.”

“Aye.”

“Zafar, once the soldiers have left, return to the temple. Set a barrier so that other sorcerers cannot approach.”

“Yes.”

“And me?”

“Tahī, you have a role to play in Barbaroi[4]. Until then, do as you please.”

As though they were in a completely different land from Tauran which was celebrating victory, there in Zer Illias which was wrapped in the silence of Antiquity and which retained traces of its prosperity, the enigmatic dialogue continued.

After they had exchanged words a while longer,

“The army will soon make a move. They will subjugate them in less than half a month. Shall we say that we’ll see each other again after that?”

“Aye. I look forward to it.”

“Until the day we meet again in Mephius.”

The two of them were still there but one presence had certainly ceased to come from within the temple.

When a full day had passed and by the time the soldiers of the various countries were arriving in haste, only the hostages were to be found. The sorcerers had vanished without a trace.

The western disturbance was settled and everyone believed that, for now at least, the officers and soldiers would be able to remove their armour and the people would be able to live peacefully once more.

But.

Not ten days after Garda had been defeated in Eimen, appalling news flew around the countries of Tauran.

In the east, Mephius had deployed an army of over ten thousand and had crossed the border with Taúlia.

Afterword

When I write a novel, I generally start by first writing the plot (a simple outline) and then sending it to the editor in charge of me.

Based on that, we go over this and that, and the details get consolidated. But this time, while I was writing Rakuin volume 6, after sending the plot out, this was the telephone conversation I had with my editor.

“I’ve taken a look at the plot.”

“Yes.” (I put my game on pause for the time being and killed the sound on the TV.) “I think the overall flow is good.”

“Yes.”

“According to this, this time. No, I say ‘this time’, but it should be ‘this time too’, Vileena doesn’t appear, huh?”

“(Ugh) She doesn’t appear… huh.”

“Huh.”

“Although she’s the heroine.”

“It’s gone on for two books.”

“That she doesn’t appear, huh.”

“Since this is the sixth book, the heroine has been absent from a third of the whole series.”

“Ha ha ha.”

“This is no laughing matter. This is, in the best of circumstances, a plain story reeking of men. I want to at least refine it into something a bit prettier.”

“Right.”

“Can’t you do something about it?”

“It’s not like I can’t but then it’ll be longer. Because even as it is, it seems kinda…”

“Long, huh.”

“Long, yeah.” (I restarted my game with it still on mute.) “Does she appear in the next one?”

“If there is a next one.”

“Please don’t say something so depressing. You’re the author.”

“I myself am full of enthusiasm, but that by itself doesn’t mean anything.”

“Then supposing that there will be a next one, she’ll appear, right?”

“As to that...”

“Do you hate writing girls?”

“I don’t hate it. It’s just that in my novels for the other company I only wrote girls so I might get confused and, aaaaaaaah, oi, dammiiit!”

“W-What happened?”

“Nothing…” (I was insta-killed by Lü Bu.) “Well then, please start writing from this plot.”

“Yes...”

After hanging up, I worked hard at levelling up my general.

The author is as he is, but next time Princess Vileena will definitely appear. I promise. However, the Western chapter hasn’t ended yet. Those who have read this volume will have realised that.

Anyway, please look forward to the next time.

P.S.

Thank you to the people who have sent me letters. All of them are my life’s treasures. They are rare items. Unique weapons. All I can offer in return is my body. Having said that, you all have gone through great trouble to deliver these to me, so I hope to be able to repay you through this work.

--Sugihara Tomonori

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Orba switches from his usual “ore” and casual way of speaking to the far politer “watashi” and a more formal speech pattern. Lasvius and Shique on the other hand have been speaking politely and respectfully to Ax from the start.
2. ↑ Fermented mare's milk used as a drink and medicine by Asian nomads.
3. ↑ [sic]
4. ↑ The barbarian village Stan talks about in volume 4. The name has been changed to Barbaroi. See the added note for vol.4 for why